Stranded Hound: A Helluva Boss Fanfiction

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by QuaintCapp

Summary

Loona had an ego, and as of recently a bruised one after being told that she was nothing but a "drunken layabout" by Moxxie. "I'll show that fat fucker", she scowls while she sets off on a job - on her own - to prove once and for all to the marksman of I.M.P that she was, in fact, an asset to Blitz's business and not just some drunken layabout. In her rush of thought, however, she had mistakenly left her only means of returning home back on the other side of the portal, rendering her completely stranded in the living world! With deep anxiety and with no idea where she was, Loona now found herself within the midst of dense woodlands, the morning sun of the living world beating down intensely. In her completely helpless position which she now found herself in, the now human-disguised hellhound decides to pick a random direction and start walking, hoping to continue her mission as normal, and then afterwards would she find a place to seek refuge from the scorching sun above her, which was beginning to cause her to feel incredibly drowsy. Little did the hellhound know at the time that this source of refuge and help would come from a most unexpected source; the form of a local, a human - a rather mild-mannered one at that.

Prologue Part 1 - The Search Begins

RIIIIIIIIIING! … RIIIIIIIIIING! …

"Nnngh-… Hm..? Fuck sakes, what now?"

Moxxie is rudely awoken to the sound of his phone blaring in his ears by the bedside table. It had been a long couple of days for both himself and Millie as the madly-in-love couple had the entire weekend to themselves, going out and at last being able to properly bond together with the bonus being that Blitz had, at least momentarily, ceased his stalking tendencies. Unfortunately work commenced the following day and both the marksman and his firebrand of a sweetheart needed as much sleep as they could get; because of this damned phone ringing by his ear, that sleep was being denied to him.

It didn't take long for Millie on the other side to groggily wake up to the sudden irritating sound coming from the opposite side of her husband; "Mmh… wh-who is it, Mox..?"

Full of irritation and fighting the tempting desperate desire to sleep, Moxxie clumsily picks up the phone and glares at the screen which was shining in his eyes, causing them to squint in irritation. After letting his eyesight adjust for a moment, Moxxie could at last determine that it was in fact Blitz who was calling them at 8:00PM. Moxxie raises his eyebrow slightly, informing Millie as to who it was to which she responds with slight confusion as well.

"Y-you sure it isn't a mistake, hun," Millie drowsily asks as she yawns, trying to force herself to stay awake as she shifted under the covers.

"Only one way to find out," Moxxie slurs as he sits upright in his bed while he finally answers the phone; "H-hello, Sir..?"

"MILLIE, MOXXIE, IT'S BAD; GET YOUR ASSES OUT OF BED AND COME OVER HERE NOW!"

Moxxie is suddenly jolted fully awake to the sound of Blitz's panicked voice on the other end of the line; he sounded confused and panicked which concerned both Millie and Moxxie who now

listened in fully to what their boss had to say.

Moxxie clears his throat as he answers with a bit more energy, his irritated tone turning into one with a hint of concern; “W-what’s going on, sir? Is everything oka-”

“NO, EVERYTHING’S NOT FUCKING OKAY, MOXXIE! EVERYTHING’S GONE TO COMPLETE SHIT!”

Moxxie’s concern grows that little bit more as he decides to put the phone on speaker so Millie, who was also now sitting up in their bed, could listen in and join in this apparently urgent conversation; “Again, what’s going on; what’s happened?”

“LOONA’S GONE THROUGH A PORTAL AND LEFT THE GRIMOIRE BACK HERE,” Blitz bellows in despair at the very millisecond Moxxie stops talking; *“I-I found her at the very last minute; she was going through it, a-and she left the fucking book behind! Now she’s stuck somewhere a-and I don’t know-.. fuck me- I don’t know where she is!”*

Blitz continues to relentlessly hyperventilate on the other end of the line, his exasperated, heavy and panic-induced breathing being heard loud and clear from the receiver.

“We’ll come right away! Where are you?” Moxxie asks as he very reluctantly pulls off the covers and gets up to throw some clothes on.

“I-I’m at the office! Please! For fuck sakes, please hurry!!” Blitz cries, beginning to choke up as it sounds like he clumsily drops his phone to the ground somewhere; *“Nononono, this isn’t fucking happening! L-Loonie.. S-SWEETIE!! LOONIE WHERE ARE YOU?!”*

It takes both Millie and Moxxie a good half an hour for them to get up and finally meet Blitz at the I.M.P headquarters.

They weren’t necessarily sure on how they planned to help Blitz out in this situation, but damn sure were they going to try. A million questions ran through the Imp Couple's heads.

"What do you think happened?" Moxxie solemnly whispers to Millie to the right of him, trying to figure out for himself what could have occurred.

"Your guess is as good as mine..." Millie concedes with a shrug as they slowly make their way up to the door which read "I.M.P Headquarters".

"Did she finally run away??" Moxxie thinks aloud, turning once again to Millie by his side, trying to prematurely find an answer through speculation.

"Again, hon', I really don't know," Millie responds bluntly as they're only a few feet away from the entrance to their office; "I don't think we should speculate - it isn't helpful."

"I know that, but it's not like this isn't unusual for, well... for her attitude," Moxxie explains.

Millie stops for a moment and turns to her husband with a slightly baffled look in her eyes; "Mox', hon', listen to yourself. I know she treats you with contempt, and don't get me wrong I've always thought she needs to wisen up and to stop treating you like pure garbage, but... at the end of the day, whether we like it or not, she is his daughter and we need to help him."

Moxxie gently nods his head begrudgingly, knowing that despite his feelings towards his boss' adoptive daughter, Millie's conviction was absolutely right; she usually was.

At long last, they made their way up to the entrance to the headquarters itself, at long last stopping just outside the door where they knew for certain Blitz would be. Before they even opened the door to find Blitz, they immediately knew that their boss had been sobbing as they heard his muffled sniffling somewhere within the meeting room. Millie is the one to open the door as they find Blitz in the left corner of the office walls, nestled underneath the whiteboard.

He had taken off his jacket and was just in his shirt, trousers and boots. Paper and other items had been flung across the room presumably in Blitz’s despair at the situation. Their boss, the usually overzealous and confident Blitz, was sobbing with his legs tucked in his arms and his head buried in his knees. He couldn’t believe this was happening; his own daughter, his Loonie, his… family, she was lost. She was lost and there was no immediate or straightforward way to tell where exactly the hellhound was.

Moxxie slowly approaches Blitz on the floor, concern and pity showing on his face as he gently puts his hand out towards his boss; “Sir…”

Blitz raises his head to look up at the shorter Imp standing in front of him with his hand slightly outstretching towards him. Blitz’s eyes were bloodshot and his cheeks were soaked with his tears; the sleeves to his white shirt were stained with his tears of despair as more of them slowly dropped down his face into his lap.

“Sir, I… I don’t know what to say… I’m sorry...” Moxxie finally says as he offers to help his boss up from the floor, Millie coming around to assist as well.

After a bit of coaxing and reassurance that they would figure out a way to find his daughter, Blitz gets up from his sulking state on the floor with much help from his favorite couple. Despite everything he may have said about Moxxie in the past, as well as the name-calling, Blitz greatly appreciated this well meant gesture as he slumped down in one of the chairs, weak from his dreadful sorrow. Millie and Moxxie stand beside him in silence, not sure of what to say or how to even begin, let alone where to begin to find the now lost hellhound. She could be anywhere at this point - how the hell could they possibly know?

“Wh- why..? Why would she do this, Mox?” Blitz despaired as his voice croaked from his earlier fits of sobbing; “Did.. did she-.. did she run away...?”

“I don’t know, Sir, I… I really don’t know,” Moxxie replies as he runs his fingers through his white hair, unsure of what to say.

“What happened before she left,” Millie interjects with a productive question, trying to move the situation along instead of stagnating at square one. If anything, Millie was perhaps the best qualified when it came to emotional support, considering how many times she helped Moxxie out of his infrequent panic attacks.

“I… I don’t know,” Blitz quietly responds as he wipes the tears from his eyes before going on to explain, taking deep breaths as Millie gently rubbed his right shoulder; “We came up here to sort out some things for tomorrow, and I heard Loonie open the portal f-from the other room. She was saying something about… about proving to me that she-.. she wasn’t useless, that she was going to go alone on one of our jobs… I-I don’t know exactly, it all happened so… so fucking fast.”

Millie and Moxxie stand there silently as Blitz gazes unfocused at the floor, obviously devastated and for good reason. Moxxie, however, felt especially guilty; he didn't want to tell Blitz, but he did make a comment a few days prior directed at Loona, telling her in frustration that all she ever seemed to do on an average day was sit around like a drunken useless layabout. For the time being, Moxxie chose not to break this to the concerned and devastated father who would most likely literally kill him if he admitted it.

Millie is the one to break the silence as she gently grabs his hand; "Is there any way we can help you?"

"…I don't know, Mills, I-… I really don't…" Blitz whimpers, more tears of grief falling from his eyes.

With small pricks of tears in his eyes, Blitz pulls out his phone and stares at his Home Screen. He bites his bottom lip, obviously trying to hold back more tears as his screen lights up to reveal what he wanted to look at; it was a picture of himself and Loona, Blitz to the left with a toothy smile on his face while Loona to the right had a much smaller smile, complete with an indifferent expression in her eyes while she flipped the camera off with her left hand. At least for the moment, this was all that Blitz had as a visual memento to remember his daughter by; that signature indifferent expression showing in her eyes with that small smile on her face, that very specific moment when both father and daughter were together.

Unlike most others, Blitz gave Loona much more than what most other hellhounds like her received; genuine care and affection. A million thoughts and questions ran through the grieving Imp's head; Where was Loona now? Was she safe? How would they be able to find her, wherever she was? One question ran through his head which nearly sent him bawling his eyes out once more; Would he ever be able to see his daughter again?

"Dammit, sweetie… why would you do this...? A-After everything I've done... What did I do wrong...?" Blitz choked through his sorrow, burying his face into his free hand as the tears fell onto his phone screen like a perpetually leaking faucet.

"We'll find her, Sir. ... I-I promise we will..." Moxxie tries to reassure as he pats his grieving boss on the shoulder, though he really was not sure how they would be able to with the little information they had.

Prologue Part 1 - The Search Begins

THWACK! … THWACK! … THWACK!

A young man up in the morning at the entrance of his property slammed the sledgehammer down hard onto the top of a timber post, driving it hard into the ground. He grunts, lifting the tool over his head once more before swinging back over his shoulders, at long last driving the post firm into the ground. Without a minute more of hesitation, the young man retrieved another post before lining it up into another small hole he had pre-dug in the ground, before lining up the sledgehammer once more to repeat the same monotonous task.

This man in question was one local of the rural town of Morrisvale on the Eastern Australian Coast, the son of a carpenter, James H. Steele, more locally known as “Jim”. Jim was a simple type of bloke living a humble, more simple life, though he was not one without intellect. He wore his usual attire that day; A broad brim dark brown Akubra hat, a scarlet long sleeve buttoned up shirt with the sleeves rolled up, a pair of black trousers and some brown Williams boots. After finally driving the second post in with his strength, Jim examined the post to see if it was straight enough. He eyes it, closing his right eye and crouching down to examine it compared to the horizon. He grunts, getting back up; “Not bad, Jim, not bad,” he complimented himself, before deciding to take a small break.

He sat down in a folding camping chair he had set up earlier in the morning and took a swig of some black tea he had brewed himself; Thankfully, it was still somewhat warm, much like the weather forecast. He looked across the road, a truck with a load of livestock drove past, intending to pass through the town. Jim relaxes, looking into the dense bushland and admiring the view.

This serenity, however, was interrupted as he saw a figure shift in between the trees. Initially, Jim thought he was seeing things but sure enough he could tell that someone was sluggishly walking in amongst the gum trees towards a long-since dried up creek bed across from his property. He watches the individual, who he could now tell was a woman, stumble slowly and sluggishly through the thicket and tall grass. To the surprise and concern of Jim, she suddenly stumbles, collapsing to the ground and into the base of the dried-up creek-bed, seemingly falling unconscious.

“Shit!” Jim exclaims, running across the road from his property and into the tree line. Not before long, he at last reached the woman in the slight gully, calling out to her to see if she was okay, deeply concerned for her well-being; “Hello! Hello, lady! Are you alright there?”

Jim stops, looking down at the woman who was barely conscious, lying face-up in the dirt. He noticed just how strange this woman was, taking note of her appearance; She had a fair skin complexion, and long gray hair which Jim personally had never seen before, the right side of her hair partially shaved in a modern type of haircut usually seen in urban areas. She wore short clothing; a dark gray crop top, a pair of black shorts, black leggings which stretched up to her thigh, and a pair of black and gray shoes.

Jim, obviously concerned for her current condition, placed his palm on her forehead, confirming that she was suffering from heat stress and a heat-induced temperature. Without a second more thought, he speaks to her, clear and concise; “Hang in there, mate, I’m going to get you out of here! Just, please, hang in there!”

Jim then proceeds to gently pick the woman, heaving her into his arms with a grunt before walking as fast as he could back up onto his property. In a rush decision, he jogs up to his Ute, opening the door to the best of his ability with the woman still in his arms and carefully rests the barely conscious woman in the passenger’s side. Jim rushes over to the driver’s side, swings the door open, and gets in with haste. In a rush, he slams the door shut before starting the engine and turning on the air conditioner to a full blast, cooling the interior down.

“Come on, matey, stay with me,” Jim demands, increasingly concerned for the woman slumped in the passenger’s seat who was trying her best to open her eyes with little success.

Jim floors it, speeding down the gravel and dirt path from his house and onto the main road into town, thanking the heavens that there was barely any traffic on the road at that time. He briefly every-so-often darts his gaze over to the woman with deep concern, who was still barely conscious and groaning ever so slightly, her face flushed red with sweat.

At long last Jim pulls up next to a pharmacy, hastily parking the car before swinging his door open, barging out of the driver’s seat and rushing to the other side. Jim curses under his breath, swinging the passenger’s side door open and hastily picking up the woman in his arms, reassuring her that she was going to be saved.

The man barged right into the pharmacy, just about smashing both doors with his entire body weight, carrying the just about unconscious stranger in his arms. With haste and bated breath, he calls out to any possible occupants.

“Oi, Victor! Victor, mate, I need help here! Vic!”

An older gentleman stumbles out of the office door adjacent to the front counter, answering the plea.

“What the bloody hell’s going on?”

Jim, just about to pass out with exhaustion himself, shows the resident pharmacist the stranger, almost unconscious in his arms; “Look, I found this woman on the edge of my property, she’s just about half dead! Got here as fast as I could!”

The pharmacist quickly realised the urgency of the situation; “Ah, shi- Quickly, in here!”

He then escorts Jim into his office, a bed and other assorted adequate equipment waiting for their arrival.

Jim manages to rest the stranger on the bed, heaving from exhaustion himself, before slumping on an adjacent chair provided to him. He rubs the sweat from his eyes as he curses from under his breath, watching the stranger intensely with concern. With haste, the pharmacist gets to work, checking up on the state of the stranger; temperature, any possible wounds, breathing rate, so on and so forth. After a quick examination, he comes to his conclusion:

“Heat exhaustion and moderate dehydration. Any minute more out there, and she’d be gone.”

Immediately, the pharmacist acquires an IV bag full of fluid, hanging it up on a stand. He then inserts a needle attached to the bag itself into the stranger’s arm for immediate flow of the contents. Afterwards, he adjusts the air conditioner in the room to the coldest setting, at the highest possible flow rate. After much effort, the pharmacist himself sits down back into his chair, wiping his brow.

“Will she be alright?” Jim asks, full of concern.

“She’ll be fine, mate, don’t worry,” Victor responds, taking a sip from a canister from his desk; “She’s very bloody lucky you found her when you did.”
The two men look towards the stranger once more, observing as the treatment stabilised her condition: her breathing had quickly stabilised, getting deeper and steadying to a reasonable rate. The two men both let out a collective sigh of relief, at last their efforts paying off.

“So, wait a minute, Jim, where did you find her,” Victor asks Jim, genuinely curious.

“Just on the outskirts of my property, where that little dip towards that old creek is,” Jim explains, turning towards Victor; “Got no bloody idea as to where she came from, or why she’s dressed like she’s come from the city, but here she is.”

“Righto,” Victor acknowledges, once again turning to his patient. He noticed that the stranger had at last begun showing more signs of life, her eyes slightly opening, looking up towards the ceiling. With this prompt to act, Victor begins talking to his patient; “Hey, lady, you okay?”

The stranger nods ever so slightly, obviously still weak.

“Don’t try to move, just rest. You’re safe now, but you’re suffering from heat stress. Just rest for now, and I’ll let you go when you’ve recovered.”

The stranger once again nods, groaning slightly before closing her eyes again.

“You did a good thing there, young Jim,” Victor remarks, grabbing Jim’s shoulder; “You’ve saved her life.”

“Well, shit, I wasn’t going to let her die, now was I,” Jim shrugged, letting out a slight chuckle through his teeth, sipping on his own water.

Victor snickers in return, taking a swig from his own canister, both men awaiting the results for this patient. The room had cooled to a reasonable degree, allowing for Victor to lower the flow rate of the air conditioner. Jim looked at his watch, then back to the stranger, then to Victor.

“If you need me, I’ll be across the road in the servo,” Jim told the doctor, still observing his patient, writing notes of her progress.

Victor merely gave a slight nod, before waving him off: “All good, matey, I’ll see you when you get back.”

With that, the taller young man got up with a wheeze from all the effort and stress from mere minutes ago, stretched his arms before quietly cursing once more over his tired, aching body, and set off. The room was quiet, with only the quiet buzzing of the air conditioner and the hum of the computer monitor to keep the doctor and his patient company. Minutes had passed before movement arose, with the stranger beginning to move once more, slowly raising her arm to place her palm onto her forehead. Victor, noticing this, raised his attention to the stranger, getting up from his chair and walking over:

“Hello? Are you feeling any better?”

The stranger turned her head slightly to her right, glancing through strained, tired eyes at the doctor now standing next to her: “…nngh… f-feel like shit.”

Victor, nodding his head slightly, noted in his clipboard: “10:15AM – Patient Improving: Drowsiness and Fatigue continues.”

Victor adjusts the IV bag, retrieving a spare onto his desk if needs be. He looks at his clipboard and places it back onto his desk, checking that everything was still in order. Before he could turn back around to his patient, she begins to speak, this time with a question:

“H…hey… a-are you V-Victor,” she groggily asks, trying to raise her head with more success than minutes earlier, her strength once again returning.

Victor turns around, wiping his brow before taking a swig of his canister once more: “Yes, I am, though there are two Victors in this town – I’m Dr. Victor Price.”

“So… n-not- argh- not Victor… M-Malloy?” The stranger once again lies her head back down onto the pillow.

“Oh, Malloy,” the doctor answers, almost bluntly; “No, I’m not Victor Malloy. He lives further up a couple of miles to the west. Why, what about him?”

“…W-was hoping to… speak w-with him,” the patient replies, rubbing her forehead once more, though this time her answer and manner of speaking was much clearer than moments ago as she once again gained consciousness.

Victor Price scoffs before letting out a wheezing laugh; “Well, good luck with that – he’s an old bastard who will attack anyone and everyone, if not everything, for even looking at him or anything he owns. My best advice to you is to stay away from him as far as humanly possible. What do you want from him, anyway? You look like one of them, I dunno, university student journalist types.”

The patient glances slightly at the doctor, hesitating slightly; “Y-yeah… agh- yeah, some-something like that… look- I don’t want to talk… can you… keep it d-down?”

“Of course, no worries,” the doctor replies, coughing slightly before returning to his computer.

Once again, silence returned to the office, allowing for the stranger to return to a resemblance of sleep once again. That was until, after a while, when Jim knocked on the door and made himself known to be present. Victor Price opens the door slightly, telling the young man to keep it down in accordance with his patient’s request. Jim obliged, gently placing a bottle of water onto the desk and a pear he had just bought.

“So, how’s she going,” Jim whispered, glancing over to the bed.

“She’s stabilising, I reckon she’ll be out of here within the hour,” the doctor whispered in return.

Jim nodded, sitting once again in his original spot. A little while later, the stranger was now able to sit up in the bed, drinking some water provided to her for ongoing sustenance. At this point, both IV bags had been used, and the needle was now discarded from the stranger’s arm. After a brief check-up on the stranger’s current state of health, the doctor made his conclusion:

“Alrighty, I reckon you’re all set,” Victor told the stranger; “For the moment, stay out of the sun, drink plenty of water, and whenever you can continue to rest. Any more problems, you can come back to me.”

“Sure, noted,” the stranger replied bluntly, still trying to get used to her surroundings after the ordeal an hour or so earlier.

“I’ll pay on her behalf, Victor, don’t worry,” Jim offered, placing a couple of bills onto the desk next to the doctor. Victor thanked the young man, accepting the payment and throwing it into his wallet.

“Thanks for that, I guess,” the patient thanked bluntly once more without looking at the young man now in front of her.

(Act I) Day 1 - First Impressions

They both walked out of the pharmacy, the gentle wind greeting them both once more, with the stranger walking one direction, and Jim walking the other, but not before the young man asked her if she needed anything on her way, only to be met with a blunt "no" before taking off across the road, sitting down on one of the benches. What seemed strange to Jim, other than her sudden appearance on the boundaries of his property, was why she looked frustrated, if not slightly anxious. It didn't seem that she was anxious about her earlier ordeal, rather about something else entirely. Still concerned about her well-being, he decided to sit on the side of the road adjacent to the stranger, without trying to make it so obvious that he was perhaps spying on her, though it was without maliciousness.

That is where young Jim sat for the next five minutes, looking up from his phone every-so-often to see whether or not the stranger was still in, at least, a self-manageable condition, trying to be inconspicuous. He wondered if his expertise of being inconspicuous was paying off. He didn't need to wonder for too long, as the stranger was now walking towards him at quite an alarming rate. This alerted Jim, prompting him to quickly stand up, before being confronted by the stranger face-to-face once more.

"You're stalking me, aren't you?" the stranger barked through slightly gritted teeth, coming right into his face.

"Oh, what, so it's called "stalking" these days to watch out for someone who had a medical episode," Jim remarked back, his figure ever-so-slightly towering over the stranger.

"So what? Why the fuck is it your business," the stranger barked back, frustration in her voice now turning into a hint of anger.

"It's called 'courtesy'! Ever heard of it," Jim snapped back. Like this stranger, Jim, too, was prone to anger in times of direct confrontation.

The stranger shot him a real dead-eye look, seemingly taken back by his retorts back to her. The stranger took a shallow breath, then sighed harshly: "Thank you for being worried, okay? But shit, if you're worried about me, just come up and ask how I'm going, and don't be a fucking creep about it!"

Jim nodded: "Look, I apologise; you're right – shouldn't have gone around that the way I did. So, anyhow, why are you down this way? I heard something earlier about Victor Malloy?"

"I was hoping if... if I could speak with him, it's-it's for an interview about him, why he's- yeah, why he's so.. uh, so loathed and an outcast," the stranger "explained", stumbling over her own words.

Jim seemed almost incredulous; "So you came out here not knowing why he's the social reject and outcast that he is? I'll tell you why; he's this region's scourge and persistent pest, an absolute stain on Australian society. He's been in and out of prison more times than anyone else. He's robbed, laundered, and intimidated everyone in this region from here to the Summit where he currently resides. If you want to know more, I could perhaps take you up there to speak with him, but you'll need someone to protect you up there - the bastard's dangerous."

The stranger hesitated, thinking about the offer, deep in thought. After a couple of seconds, she sighed, and looked back up at Jim: "You know what? Sure, I'll come with you. There better be no shady shit like you pulled off just now, because I will quite literally end your life."

Jim raises his hands, backing off: "You can take my word for it, I'm not the type to do that! If I do, then you have permission to kill me, yeah?"

The stranger mumbled something harsh from under her breath, before nodding slightly: "Lead the way."

Jim nodded, gesturing for the stranger to follow him. He led her to his Ute, seemingly 40+ years old in appearance. It was a moderate gray in colour, with small signs of its age appearing on the exterior. Jim climbed into the driver's seat, as the stranger followed, squeezing herself inside to the passenger side. After checking with the stranger that everything was sorted, he started the engine, the old workhorse powering to life before pulling away, passing houses, and into the surrounding ranges.

The stranger stared out the window, giving brief yet stabbing, incredibly suspicious glances back towards the driver, who paid no attention to his passenger but to the road ahead. The road got more barren, properties and houses being exchanged for large, open plains with the occasional house off into the distance. After a while, Jim turned to the right off the main road into a gravel and dirt track, the ride became that bit rougher as the tires contacted the uneven ground.

The stranger became alert, noticing how suspicious this road they were now traveling on was. She furiously snapped her head once again towards the driver, who was still looking ahead; "What the fuck is this!?"

Jim jumped briefly, spooked by the sudden yelling shattering the trancing quiet; "This is the road up to Malloy's property! Fucking hell, woman, don't scare me like that!"

"I told you once that I would KILL you if you tried anything shady, and I dunno, but this looks VERY fucking shady to me," the stranger barked, bearing her teeth with a ferocious stare which Jim had never seen anything like up until that point.

"Malloy's a very fucking shady guy, lady, that's why he lives in the middle of ruddy nowhere," Jim explained, getting slightly uncomfortable with his ill-tempered passenger; "I don't know what to tell you. Now, either you can get out here if you don't trust me and risk suffering heat exhaustion AGAIN and DYING out here, or we'll finish this trip up there in the comfort of this Ute; the choice is yours, but you're beginning to really test my fucking patience."

The stranger gave Jim a real deadeye look, eyes wide and piercing. She was about to bark something in return but hesitated briefly before facing the road once more, choosing to pipe down. She glances down at her phone, staring at it for a few seconds before grunting in frustration at what appeared to be a lack of reception. Quiet once again settled before Jim, probably foolishly, began to speak once more.

"So, lady," Jim briefly asked.

She grunts, looking back towards the driver with a side-eye; "What?"

"How did you end up out here in the first place? Forgive me, but you do NOT look like you're from around here, not to mention you seem to not have a vehicle of your own."

"...Is it really that important for you to know," the stranger interrogated.

Jim shrugs: "Well, I guess for you it's important if you want to get out of here without my help, which you obviously hate."

The stranger hesitates, seemingly trying to think of what to say next. She runs her fingers through her hair before replying; "no... not at the moment, I don't," she says quietly, an ever so slightly pensive look on her face appearing which Jim noticed, confusing him slightly:

"So what happened, why don't you? Like, someone dropped you off or something?"

The stranger nods, looking out the window; "Y-yeah- well," the stranger stumbles over words, once again thinking of what to say for a few seconds before continuing; "I was staying at the hotel in town overnight with some friends, and... I guess they left me behind. I've tried calling them but they won't answer or they're ignoring me deliberately. I don't know, but... I guess I'm stuck here until they come back."

Jim acknowledges this, growing ever-so-slightly sorry for the stranger's predicament though something told him that it didn't seem much like the truth; small wonder why she seemed so snappy, he thought to himself: "Well, shit... I'm sorry to hear that, lady... Do you have any cash at all, or...?"

The woman shakes her head, gesturing to her phone; "Just this."

Jim thinks for a while, continuing to drive up the road, nearing the property before he finally speaks again; "Well, look, if the situation is that dire for you, then..." he thinks again before continuing, "Then I guess you're welcome to stay at my place, free of charge or rent or anything until you can get on to your-"

The stranger snaps her head at Jim again, glaring at him with a very suspicious look before hesitating, thinking about it. She's quiet for a couple of seconds until she finally responds; "I'll think about it."

Jim nods, looking back to the road before peering down the embankment to the right, noticing something in between the trees. He stops the car for a minute as he peered down, his gaze fixated with a furrowed brow.

The stranger notices the driver's sudden gaze, looking down towards the general direction; "What?"

"...I think that's Malloy down there," Jim said, getting out of the car.

The stranger darts her eyes down the embankment, seeing a person down in between the trees and bushes before asking; "Is it?"

"I think so..." Jim replied quietly, finally getting out of the car and slamming the door shut, grabbing a rifle that he kept from behind him. He looks down in between the trees as he called out, with the woman getting out as well, albeit cautiously.

"Oi, Malloy! Malloy, is that you," Jim calls out, his voice echoing down the embankment.

There was no reply.

"Malloy, you bastard; what the fuck are you doing down there," Jim reiterated, barking at the figure.

The woman stares down the embankment, squinting her eyes... "Oh shit, that is Malloy," she quietly whispers.

Suddenly she rushes right down the embankment, running towards the figure!

"OI! WHAT THE FUCK- WHAT ARE YOU DOING!? GET BACK HERE," Jim bellowed, running down after the stranger, fearing for her safety! He rushes in between the trees, in awe of just how seemingly quick and skilled the stranger was through the thicket: "LADY! OI! WHAT THE FU- WHAT THE FUCK ARE... are you...?"

He stops, finding the woman standing before what he could confirm was, indeed, Malloy; albeit... dead. There he was, Victor Malloy, well-known local stalker and "former" criminal, hanging from the tree branch with a noose around his neck. His brown shirt was ragged and torn, his loose jeans ripped, his shoes gone to reveal his left foot almost torn off, hanging by a thread of his bone. The stranger looks up at the now dead Malloy, speechless, and her hands on her hips, her gray hair in her face from all the running.

"What the fuck," the stranger exclaims, looking back towards a flabbergasted Jim.

"Yes, what the fuck! Why'd you run off like that!? He could've killed you," Jim spluttered, rifle in his hands.

She points up into the tree; "Well, obviously he can't now," she replied, looking back up at the body.

Jim shakes his head, looking up at Malloy's wretched face which looked to have been beaten with a blunt-force object before he died. He examined Malloy's odd facial expression; his eyes were wide, his jaw wretched and open as if he had died screaming, possibly terrified of his demise. Who had done it, he didn't know, but one thing was for sure; whoever did it obviously had a vengeance.

The stranger punches the tree, frustrated and angry for whatever reason; "FUCK!"

"I'm going to call this to the constable... this is bizarre," Jim states.

The stranger still stared at the body, her face still full of a seemingly odd rage and frustration which puzzled Jim; why was she so upset that this son-of-a-bitch was dead? Did she want answers, seeming that she was a journalist? She'd make a poor journalist with how she was acting towards people close to her within a 10-foot radius, Jim thought to himself.

Jim begins walking back up to his Ute, followed by the stranger, still infuriated by this development. They soon arrive back at the Ute, Jim hopping back in first, followed by the stranger getting in and slamming the door shut, her face wretched with anger. He was going to say something about her slamming the door but decided against it, not wanting to be hit with abuse. The drive back into town was quiet, the stranger frustrated and seemingly deep in thought about not only her predicament, but as well as the newly dead Malloy.

Jim hesitantly broke the silence as he parked the Ute; "I'm heading into the police station here; you can get out if you'd-"

"Shut the fuck up," she abruptly mumbles, her gaze looking straight forward.

Jim is taken aback by this aggression but chose not to stoop down to her level of anger. He grunts, getting out of the car, watching as the stranger inside buries her head in her hands, sighing. He walks into the police station and reports the body. After a while of talking with Senior Constable Pearson, the local veteran Police Officer, Jim comes back out, finding the stranger sitting on the back of the Ute, looking up towards the ranges, facing away from him. He walks up towards the stranger cautiously, finding her with a blank expression and obviously deep in thought.

"You alright," Jim asked cautiously, ready for the torrent of abuse and sarcasm.

As expected, the sarcasm came; "Just fucking fine and peachy," she replies bluntly.

Jim says nothing, looking towards the ranges with her albeit from a moderate distance.

"So, like... you made your decision? You want to stay with me until your friends get back, or...?" Jim offers, still staring off into the horizon.

There is silence before the stranger huffs then afterwards quietly responding, seemingly not wanting to be heard too loudly; "Please...?"

Jim nods: "Alright, we'll head back."

Jim jumps back in, followed by the stranger getting in afterwards, ruffling her hair out of her face. He starts the engine and drives back home up the same way they came from. It was a bit of a drive, with peace and quiet filling the ambient sounds around them instead of torrents of abuse and sarcasm. At last, Jim slows down and pulls up into a gravel and dirt pathway to the left, up a small hill to approach a lovely looking single-storey timber house. It had a front balcony which stretched around the front, was painted a fine yellowish-off white with green borders for the windows, as well as a green front door, and a brownish-red tin roof. Jim parks the Ute inside a tin and steel shed adjacent to the house, where another car under a sheet was also parked.

He turns off the engine and grunts; "Welcome home," Jim remarks, with no reaction other than a blank glance by his passenger next to him.

Jim gets out and retrieved his rifle before entering onto the balcony, heading to the front door, followed by the stranger. He unlocks the door and gestures for the stranger to come inside, which

she did, albeit with brief hesitation. The stranger observes how old, albeit pristine, the house was. They had just entered into a hallway with a glass and timber cabinet to their left; this is where Jim kept his rifle and ammunition as well as some other personal photos and old-fashioned silverware, seemingly only for display. The floor was covered with a dark-red carpet, clean and well-kept.

There were a few doors to the left of the hallway all lined up, the first door being the one to Jim's bedroom, the next one over being one to a vacant spare bedroom, and the last one towards the end of the hallway being the bathroom, with an additional door at the very end of the hallway being one to a laundry. To the right of them, where Jim led the stranger through, was a large living area with an old-fashioned fireplace, a few lounge chairs, a couch, a dining table, some more cabinets, some of them empty, and a kitchen at the far end with a large window at the back for natural lighting.

"Well, here we are," Jim huffed. "Hope it's not too bad."

The stranger grunts: "Eh, it's alright for now, I guess," she replies, a blank expression still on her face, though she looked around with mild interest. She gestures to the hallway once again; "So, that middle door; that's my bedroom?"

Jim nods; "Yep."

The stranger nods; "Okay, cool, thanks."

The stranger then sits down on the couch, sighing before pulling out a cigarette to the surprise of Jim.

"Hey, look, another thing," he interrupts as the stranger shifted her eyes towards him in response; "No smoking in the house, please. If you want to do that, there's a lounge chair outside for you."

The stranger rolls her eyes before getting up and going outside, sitting down on the lounge chair.

Jim grunts, slumping down onto one of the lounge chairs in front of the fireplace, where there was a surprisingly high-tech modern thin-screen TV. He decides against turning it on, which he rarely did anyhow, and took off his broad-brim hat, resting it in his lap and looking at his own phone which he pulled from his side-table.

"Strange woman, she is," he thinks aloud to himself.

The rest of the afternoon was with little event, the 'strange woman' opting to stay outside on the balcony to watch the sunset. Occasionally, she would check her phone, perhaps to see if the internet was connected. On all occasions that she did use her phone, it didn't seem to want to connect to anything. This lack of connectivity or function would prompt the stranger to growl in frustration and swore from under her breath before opting to just stare blankly into the horizon, "admiring" the view. Afternoon turned to night, with the strange woman now choosing to reside in her new bedroom, and at one point Jim came in with a simple sandwich that he had made for her. At the time, she refused it, directing the owner of the house to simply 'put it on the dresser' next to the door, which he did so. With little more happening after a while of peace and quiet, Jim opted to head to bed, announcing it to the stranger in the spare bedroom who didn't answer, obviously already asleep herself. After a little while of lying in his bed, with the moon reflecting its light on the horizon, Jim finally fell asleep.

Day 2 - A Rough Start

Jim woke up early, as he usually tended to do. He stretched briefly, cracking his knuckles before getting up, throwing on a robe he had before walking out through the doorway and to the living room, sitting down in his accustomed lounge chair in front of the TV. For a little while, Jim thought about this strange woman, about how she got where he found her, why she was dressed in an outfit unsuitable for the bushland and generally wild environment that she was walking through; a dark gray crop-top with black shorts, thigh-high leggings and a pair of shoes only really fit for an urban environment. Jim didn't think about it too much, though; who was he to judge, anyhow?

At long last an hour or so later, the strange woman walked into the living room, that blank expression still on her face. She pays him no mind, not even looking in his direction before plopping herself down onto the couch and sitting upright, looking through her phone at something, still seemingly trying to connect to the internet with no success. She sighs heavily, throwing her phone onto the couch space next to her and runs her fingers through her hair.

Jim turns his head, looking towards the stranger; "No luck yet, hey?"

The stranger shakes her head; "What do you think?"

Jim obviously took this as an abrupt 'no' and nods, getting up from his chair to make them both something to eat. The stranger watches him intently from the couch, obviously still suspicious of Jim's intentions. He chose to ignore her stare and made himself a bowl of cereal while at the same time dropping in two slices of grain bread into the toaster. For the entire five-or-so minutes that Jim spent in the kitchen, not once did the stranger break her suspicious and judging gaze from what he was doing, seemingly making sure that he didn’t try anything funny.

"What would you like on your toast," Jim asked the house guest, trying to be polite as he took the fresh slices of toast and placed them on a plate, ready to be served.

"Anything you got, I don't care, just don't you dare try to put anything in it," she warned bluntly, staring him down intently.

Jim shook his head; "I'm not going to do anything to you, mate."

"Is that right? And why should I trust you, then? I barely know you," she bluntly replied, glaring at him with a suspicious, piercing stare which could absolutely kill anyone if death-stares alone had the ability.

"Because if I wanted to do anything to you, I would've tried it yesterday! I wouldn't be making you bloody breakfast, either" Jim retorted, trying to gain her trust as he took a glass jar from out of the fridge.

The strange woman abruptly sighs in response and looks out towards the mesmerising light of the sunrise reflecting on the accumulated clouds above; "Whatever, but I am watching you."

Jim opted to spread a bit of jam on the stranger's breakfast, placing it on a plate and presenting it to her. He proceeded to place it on the coffee table in front of the couch, to which the strange woman glared at it briefly before picking it up, examining it. She hesitated briefly before taking a small bite of it, holding it in her mouth before at last being convinced that the food hadn't in any way been tampered with.

"See," Jim pointed out, sitting back down on the lounge chair and spinning it around to face his guest, "I wouldn't try anything with you, you'd eat me alive if I did."

The stranger stares at Jim with a blank yet judgmental expression, not humoured by his remark; "You got that right," she replied bluntly, swallowing her toast.

The room was quiet for a while, a long silence overwhelming the scene. This silence lasted until Jim opted to break it; "So, you want to head into town for the day? I got some shit that I have to do and you can go do what you want, get what you want. I'll give you some cash to spend."

The lady shrugged, looking down at her plate; "Sure, whatever, I don't care."

Jim shrugged back; "Alrighty, we'll leave in a couple of hours, give you some time to prepare yourself."

The stranger replies with a simple emotionless "alright" before finishing her food and heading to the kitchen for some water.

Jim decides to try and start a conversation, which was probably a bad idea; "So, anyhow... What's your name? I'm Jim, by the way."

The stranger finishes her drink before staring with a piercing squint across from the kitchen at Jim before getting straight to the point; "What makes you think I want to tell you anything about myself, Jim?"

Jim puts up his hand slightly; "Alright, alright, I'm sorry I even asked."

The strange woman grunts, finishing with a quiet "whatever" before heading back to her room, leaving him alone to wonder how this day would end up. The next couple of hours went just about the same; an attempt at interaction by Jim with his temporary tenant wherever he could only to be met with suspicion and silence. Jim, despite her rude demeanor, didn't much blame her; how could you trust a stranger who welcomes you into his home from practically out-of-the-blue, as well as having no choice but to accept the invitation? Small wonder why this strange woman was so closed off with her surroundings.

After a little while, Jim was at last ready to head off. He notifies the stranger who was laying down on the couch, simply looking up to the roof. The stranger, however, doesn't answer. Jim shortly after heads outside to retrieve his vehicle from within the shed, leaving the doors open so he could back it out. After starting the Ute with a little bit of struggle due to its age, he slowly pulls it out onto the gravel and dirt pathway, with the stranger unexpectedly waiting for him, leaning on the side of the shed wall with one leg crossed over the other.

"Ah, you finally ready, are you," Jim calls out after manually rolling down the window.

"I'm here, aren't I," the strange woman replies before opening the passenger's side door and getting in; "Nice car, by the way," she adds quietly, looking away from him to the west.

"Ah, cheers," Jim replies before reaching into his wallet, pulling out a few fifty-dollar notes; "There's a hundred for you to spend if you need."

The stranger observes the notes and takes them off his hands, albeit with hesitancy; "Is there a catch?"

Jim shakes his head; "Nah, nah, no catch whatsoever. Only catch is that you spend what you want with it."

"Oh," the stranger replies; "Well... thanks, I guess?"

Jim replies with a simple "no worries" before making sure to lock the garage doors before putting the car in drive and heading for the main road. Soon enough, Jim along with his passenger accompanying him were heading into town. Any attempts of small talk were met with very brief answers. It was when the stranger gave Jim a stare that told him to "stop talking" that he gave up all attempts at polite conversation. Jim pulls into the town centre, pulling off to the side of the street to let his passenger out. The stranger did so, sighing before getting back out, taking her (practically useless) phone with her.

"I'll be about an hour at most. I'll meet you back around here," Jim called out, the stranger's reply being a simple dull "got it" before he pulled off up the road a few minutes away.

Loona momentarily stands and watches with an indifferent expression as Jim's pick-up pulls off from the side of the road and back onto the main road, at last getting smaller and smaller as it made its way further out of the town center. For the moment, she was alone to her own devices with one-hundred dollars to spend. After fixing up her long gray hair, Loona begins walking down the footpath as she received curious glances from the locals as she passed on by, though these looks were given out of benign curiosity as to who she was rather than that given out of perversion.

She looks around with mild curiosity, wondering what exactly she could spend with this money generously given to her by this mysterious country yokel. Although she did secretively appreciate him giving her a place of refuge while she waited for help to arrive, she wondered as to why he was being so nice. It didn't seem as if he had an ulterior motive either, as pointed out to her in the morning while Jim made her breakfast, though nonetheless she was still suspicious. Maybe he was just empathetic? Was he doing this out of pity? She really didn't know for sure.

Jim drove his Ute up to a warehouse located on the outskirts of town, where a man appearing to be in his mid-50s with black hair and wore only a navy-blue singlet, baggy work trousers and a pair of worn work boots was waiting for him.

"G'day, Roy," Jim called out, getting out of the Ute, and heading to the scruffy looking bloke's location.

"Morning, young fella," the man replied in return, "How's life, hey?"

"Ah, not too bad – working hard, hardly working," Jim replied as he shook Roy's rough old hand, "So! I heard you got a job for me soon."

"Sure do mate," Roy nodded, coughing a moment before regaining his composure; "Just the usual, yanno? Wild boar sighting south-east of here, big fuck-off pack of them. You got that Lee Enfield rifle with you, dontcha?"

"Absolutely I do," Jim nodded, "Just been serviced the other day, new parts and all. Now what was this about a big one I heard," the young man inquired as Roy led him into his office, the interior of which only held a desk, an ancient computer which didn't work half the time, and a few chairs.

"It's rumours so far," Roy replied, sitting down on his office chair behind the desk, "But, they say he's around about four foot tall. He's massive! Haven't seen something that big since nineteen ninety-nine."

"Fuck," Jim exclaimed, kind of terrified of the prospect.

The rest of the conversation dragged on, mostly about business dealings. Roy, much like Jim, was a carpenter by trade and pig-shooter as a second job, mostly sniffing out leads for Jim to go after. How it worked, usually, was that Jim would hunt said boars down and bring them to Roy for cold storage until they could be shipped away by pest-control. The back-and-forth between employee and employer went on for ten minutes until Roy changed the topic towards the end.

"Now tell me Jim; what's this about a young woman you found yesterday?"

"Oh, her? Yeah, nah, found her near my property down near the dried-up creek-bed. Half dead she was, until I sped to Price's store - I ended up saving her life," Jim explained, scratching his cheek.

"Good on ya, young fella," Roy applauded; "You've grown up a lot since you started working for me – you're more, let's say... considerate."

"Yeah, yeah," Jim replied as he shook his head, "I'm a much different bloke-"

Out of nowhere, Jim's phone started blaring loudly, interrupting the conversation. He reaches for his pocket, seeing who it was; an unfamiliar number but one he swore he could almost recognise.

Jim exited the office, answering the phone; "Sorry, Roy, gotta answer this. Hello? Ah, Senior Constable, how's it going? ... Yeah? Yeah, I'm up the road, what's going on? ... Oh shit, you're joking? ... Oh for fu- okay, so-... In the station, okay, I'll be up there in a few minutes."

Jim stumbles right back into the office, a grim look on his face; "Sorry Roy, gotta cut this short. Copper's want me up at the police station, that young woman's just had a fight and they've got her in the watchhouse."

"Bloody hell," Roy replies waving Jim off; "Alright, I'll see you this time next week."

Jim waved back before jumping right in his Ute and headed off back into the town centre. By the sounds of the very brief information he got, it sounded like there was an altercation between the stranger and a small group of young men who had tried something on her, which by the sounds of things ended in both groups being detained. After what felt like a drive that lasted centuries rather than mere minutes, Jim parks in front of the police station, a feeling of foreboding anticipation overwhelmed his mind as he pulled the handbrake roughly, swiping the keys out of the ignition and swinging the driver's side door with a frustrated huff. There were many things he wanted to do today; dealing with whatever happened was certainly not one of them.

Jim briskly walks into the station and towards the front desk where the Senior Constable, who Jim had spoken on the phone to, was waiting for him with a look of frustration on his own, middle-aged face.

The sound of the strange woman yelling profanities at nobody in particular echoed in the distance in the holding cells:

”Get me out of here, you fucking pigs! You know what I can do to you!? I’ll tear your fucking lungs out!”

”Shut your mouth in there, you idiot! Haven't you caused enough for us today?!” The senior constable bellows out into the general area of the holding cells, his patience quite obviously short with the strange woman!

"What's she gone and done," Jim asked the officer waiting for him, careful not to interrupt the authoritative figure too abruptly.

"Nothing good," the Senior Constable bluntly replied as he shook his head, "Gang of youths tried something foolish and there was a massive brawl between her and this small group of teens. One of them had a knife and the young lady there almost broke his arm because of it. Lucky for her, we're going to let her off this time as it was self defense but it still doesn't justify her non-cooperation and aggression. She said to call for you to pick her up."

Jim looks down, trying to make sense of the situation. He rubs the bridge of his nose and whispers something along the lines of "give me a break" before announcing his intention to bring her back "home." The Senior Constable quite enthusiastically obliges, and a few minutes later the strange woman is escorted to the front desk with an angered look in her eye that made Jim so incredibly uneasy; the phrase "Murder In Her Eye" was perhaps the most fitting description for whatever lay behind her ferocious gaze. Reluctantly, Jim leads the stranger back into the Ute where she slumps back into the passenger's seat, her piercing eyes fixated in front of her with no signs of compromising her clearly furious mood.

The drive back was eerily quiet, Jim being incredibly careful not to break the silence for fear of what would come if he did, directed at him or not. Whenever he safely had the chance, he gave a slight glance towards the stranger; there was something so perpetually terrifying about the look in her eyes and her posture - she was sitting upright, but in an upright that was alert and at any moment ready to strike. If there was ever a word to perfectly describe that look in her eyes combined with her incredibly tense demeanor, it was "Animosity" or "Malice". That look in her eyes - nobody could possibly imagine just how much rage there was behind them. After what felt like an eternity, they finally arrived back home, the stranger still gazing in front of her with that same mad look in her eye.

Cautiously, the driver gets out, trying his absolute best to say nothing, followed by the stranger who got out and slammed the door shut with such force that it rocked the Ute considerably! Jim was going to say something once again and almost did, but upon seeing how visibly enraged the stranger was, that haunting deep scowl seemingly sitting permanently on her face, he decided not to add fuel to the fire. Jim at last made his way up the veranda, opening the front door to allow himself to return inside, the eerily quiet stranger following behind him in a rather uncomfortable fashion. The homeowner cautiously made his way into the kitchen, expecting the stranger to slump herself back onto the couch. Instead of what Jim initially had expected, she made a Beeline to the

spare bedroom, slamming the door shut so hard that the reverberation made the entire house shudder!

This was the last straw for the homeowner who was sick of this situation already! Before he could think about what he was just about to do, Jim let out a guttural huff in sheer frustration and marched straight to the spare bedroom, calling out to the woman!

"Okay, that's it! Lady, I get it, you're furious – but for fuck sakes, that does NOT give you authority to tear down my hou-"

Jim was abruptly cut off before he could finish, hearing a sound that made his heart sink; from within the room, albeit muffled, he could hear the stranger give off shallow heaving breaths, followed by a suppressed, anguished sob.

Jim immediately ceased any other attempt to confront the clearly anguished stranger, shaking his head slightly with an odd sense of pity. The absolute hopelessness she must be feeling, Jim thought to himself, all the while he began to feel sorrowful over just how messed-up this much be for his tenant. It was enough to be stranded in a completely foreign location all alone without any way to contact the outside world, but then to have a fight that ends you up in police custody? It's too much.

Jim made his way outside, giving the stranger as much space as she possibly needed as she began bellowing loudly to herself from within her room:

“I want to leave this fucking shithole! I want to go the fuck home! Why can’t I just go home," The stranger bellowed, her voice echoing from within the room with a voice that could penetrate walls, her thoughts obviously in a complete mess; "Please- for fuck sakes, PLEASE! I just... dad, please, I'm an idiot! I-I'M SORRY!"

“Fucken hell…” Jim whispers to himself, perhaps utterly bewildered at just how bizarre and confusing this entire situation was in the first place.

After around half an hour of helplessly listening to the occasional sound of suppressed sobbing and ear-splitting cursing, the sound finally ceased to the slight relief of the homeowner. He slowly turned around after a minute or so of waiting, still in his seat, wondering if his tenant was as "okay" as she could possibly be. Jim thought of ways he could possibly help, resorting to what he personally thought would grant her even the slightest of comfort. He walked into the kitchen and poured the strange woman a small glass of premium rum, finished off with ice and a few drops of coke.

Jim with the beverage in his hand made his way to the spare bedroom door and called out: "Hey lady, you alright?"

There was no reply or sound.

Jim cleared his throat; "Hey, look... I brought you some rum and coke if you need it, help you cool down-"

"Leave it on the dresser in here then leave me alone," the stranger abruptly called out, her voice shaky and sore presumably from her sorrow.

Jim, without saying another word, obliges, cracking open the door and slipping the drink onto the dresser. Without a moment more of delay he shut the door and made his way back out onto the veranda, sitting back down on the lounge chair before tipping his broad brim hat over his eyes. About ten minutes later, Jim hears the sound of creaking floorboards next to him and the familiar sound of the second chair creaking from someone's weight. He lifts his hat off his head to be met once again with the strange woman who was looking down, her eyes partially red. Jim was about to say something before his tenant broke the silence for him:

"Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what," Jim replied, raising his eyebrow.

"Fucking- being all nice to me, giving me drinks, accommodating me – doing THAT," she bluntly replies, turning her head towards him with a baffled squint, as if the concept of "generosity" was a completely foreign concept to her.

"Matey," Jim began to explain, slight pivoting himself within his respective chair; "You're a guest in my house. What's mine is yours, yeah? Now, as far as I am concerned, you are in a very bloody difficult spot – you've got nowhere to go at the moment, and it appears that your mates have forgotten about you, and it is my duty as someone who has voluntarily taken you in, to accommodate you."

The stranger shakes her head, obviously confused; "But what have I done to deserve ANY of this? I don't honestly like this whole generous bullshit you're doing; I hate being helped, I don't deserve

any of it, and nor did I want it in the first place!"

"Oh come off it," Jim refutes, throwing his hand up; "You're not as big, tough and mean as all that, I know you're not!"

The stranger scoffs, mocking Jim's attempt at understanding; "You know NOTHING about me!"

"Then let me learn something about you, for goodness sake; you don't have to be so recluse," Jim retorts, half yelling in a subconscious response to the stranger's own rather aggressive and argumentative tone of voice!

The stranger tilts her head away slightly at an angle, still glaring at Jim with a judging expression. She holds this position for a few seconds before she huffs in what appeared to be defeat in the exchange of barbs, turning her head away fully before lighting a cigarette; "You'll learn soon enough that I'm not made of fucking rainbows and cotton wool."

Jim grunts: "Yeah, yeah," he replies, dismissing her callousness as he begins shuffling through a collection of casings he had sitting on his lap.

These casings caught the attention of the stranger who stopped smoking and glared at the contents in Jim's hands with a hint of curiosity; "What's that?"

"Nothing, just some old CDs," Jim replies bluntly while he continued to look at the contents within his hands.

The stranger hesitates for a moment, leaning towards Jim and peering at one of the labels; it seemed that she had recognized something oddly familiar to her; "Is... is that Guns and Roses?"

"What, you know them do you," Jim replies, looking back up at his now curious tenant. The bushman's eyes perked up with attention ever-so-slightly, noticing how the strange woman's demeanor had somewhat improved at the sight of something perhaps familiar.

"Know them?" She replies, almost incredulous; "I love them."

"Oh, is that right," Jim replies, raising his brow and continuing to humor his tenant's sudden shift in tone; "I've also got Metallica, AC/DC, uhm... some other metal bullshit that I've never listened to..."

"...You don't mind if... if I played one of them," the stranger quietly requested, perhaps not wanting to be heard too loudly pleading.

Jim nods his head and shrugs; "I don't mind at all, be my guest," he insists, handing her the stack of CD casings.

Immediately, Jim could see the strange woman's demeanor lighten up, moving her hair away from her eyes, seeming to at last find a hint of enjoyment in something. He smirks slightly, relieved to see his house guest moving away from being nothing but glum. Jim vanishes into the house briefly, returning with a portable CD player he had lying around. He hands it to the stranger who examined it before promptly opening the disk slot and slipping one of the "Guns and Roses" CDs inside. The device momentarily processed the contents of the CD before at last playing one of the tracks. The strange woman takes another brief pull of her cigarette before sitting back in her chair, appearing to be relieved to hear something that was, presumably, all too familiar and comforting to her.

Jim notices this, nodding his head very briefly before getting up; "Play them as many times as you like, I'll be in the garage," he announces, only to be met with a simple "okay" from his strange tenant.

The rest of the day until late afternoon was considerably more mundane; Jim doing his own thing as the stranger played track after track, at long last appearing to become comforted in something she genuinely found interest and familiarity in. At one point, Jim caught the stranger quietly singing along to some of the lyrics to his brief amusement before ducking back into his garage to continue general maintenance on his Ute and other miscellaneous work. After a little while, Jim returned inside, the stranger since moved back to the comfort of her room to continue listening. From the sounds of things, the CD that was playing was at last approaching its ending track. Jim shuddered, noticing the sudden drop in temperature that was very much associated with the absolute chaos that was the local weather at times.

After a quick shower and slipping into his pajamas and his robe, he prepared a meal for both of them; nothing special, just some potatoes, lamb, and a bread roll. The sun had set earlier than usual and by 6:30PM, it was fully dark outside, only the light on the veranda illuminating, although failing to illuminate anything further than the boundaries of the home. They both sat at the table, Jim on one end and the stranger on the exact opposite. He didn't expect much from the strange woman in the way of talking, observing how she merely stared at her plate, avoiding eye contact.

She ate slowly, seeming to enjoy it, though her blank stare and slightly raised brow wasn't much to go by. Jim did the same, though a minute or so in, the unexpected happened:

"Apologies for slamming your door," the stranger said quietly, taking a sip of water.

Jim looked up, slightly surprised; "Pardon?"

"Apologies for slamming your door," the stranger repeated, glancing up from her plate, "I was just-... well, I think that officer explained it to you well enough."

Jim blinked, not expecting this much interaction from her at all; "Oh- Okay? Apology accepted, mate, I understand. So, tell me, what happened?"

The stranger looked up, adjusting her spiked choker before answering; "Alright, so... I was coming out of that clothing store near the gas station, and there's this small group of younger men, right, probably no more than twenty by the looks of it. They come up to me, asking if they could, as they put it, "show me a good time". I told them to fuck off, one of them pulled out a knife so I smacked it out of his hands, bent his arm back and pinned him to the floor."

The stranger began to laugh slightly, recalling this turn of events; "The other three literally shit themselves and took off running, playing victim and all that! Luckily I had witnesses!"

Jim couldn't help but chuckle himself, shaking his head; "Fucking ratbags, yeah I'm familiar with who they are. But then I understand you got aggressive with the Coppers?"

The stranger nodded; "Yeah, I did. But, hey, as I'm sure you know by now, I'm a bit of a recluse and also just generally intolerable to bullshit; I was raging."

Jim acknowledged this with a grunt; "Oh, I'm sure, but I know Constable Pearson; they're a good bunch of blokes and they just wanted to help you out. Being all aggressive towards them only makes their job harder and your situation worse."

The stranger nods, seeming to agree after thinking on the notion, a slight look of realization appearing on her face. The room momentarily filled with nothing but the sound of a distant truck passing by before the stranger spoke again:

"So, like, how'd you get that, uh, "Ute" of yours, as you keep calling it?"

"Oh that one," Jim replied, "Got it from my dad. He used to drive it, but one day stopped due to health issues. There was no way in hell he was going to sell it, so he handed the ownership and the keys over to me completely."

"Huh, that's nice," the stranger simply replied, prodding at her food with a fork.

"What about you," Jim continued; "What about your parents?"

The stranger froze, still looking down at her plate, presumably in thought on how to respond. She sniffs, looking back up; "I don't want to talk about it."

"I understand," Jim reassures, finishing his food. He eats the last of his bread roll before wiping his mouth, getting up to dump his plate in the sink.

From the confines of the kitchen, Jim continued his attempted small talk; "So, lady, tell me; you got a place of employment?"

"I guess," the stranger responds, slowly finishing the last of her lamb which she saved for last.

"What is it," Jim asks, curious.

The stranger seemingly hesitates; "Oh, nothing, I just help out at a... butcher. Y-yeah, a butcher."

Jim raises his brow, genuinely curious; "Is that right? What do you do there," he asks, washing his plate.

The lady huffs, shrugging; "Oh, you know, just... being surrounded by, you know, blood and all that kinda shit."

Jim chuckles from across the room; "Yeah I get the gist of it. I used to be one when I was around sixteen. Only lasted six months because I wanted to pursue my dad in carpentry and pig shooting, just general hands-on stuff."

"And butchering wasn't enough," the stranger queried, looking towards the kitchen as she made her way over with her now empty plate.

"Nah not for me," Jim confirms, washing both plates and leaving them out to dry.

The stranger grunts before heading off to the bathroom for a shower. After a few minutes, she emerges, now wearing a set of her own pajamas she bought moments before her incident with the local thugs. She stretches before notifying the homeowner that she would be in her room before doing so, closing the door behind her, not to emerge until the next morning.

Jim stays up a little while before heading to bed himself but not before making a detour to the bathroom to brush his teeth. He looks down at the sink to find a curious discovery; In the basin of the sink was a small patch of what appeared to be hair. He picks it up cautiously, examining it; originally he assumed it was just from the woman's long gray hair, but this was ruled out slightly when he noticed that there was also dark grayish-black hair in the bundle as well. He shrugs, not taking too much note of it before throwing it in the bin before finally brushing his teeth and making a beeline straight to bed.

Day 3 - Peace and Somber Tranquility

The time was around about seven in the morning, with Jim's tenant at last waking up. Loona lay in bed face-up towards the ceiling, staring blankly as she huffs, realizing that her ordeal was not yet over - a part of her wondered if it would ever be. "Would she be stuck in this unfamiliar place forever? Would her "friends" ever come back for her? Did they forget about her?" - These thoughts whirled through Loona's head before she snapped out of it, opting to get out of bed to do something "productive". She makes her way into the kitchen and made herself a bit of toast with jam, much like what she had the day before. She eats it slowly, this time now convinced that nothing in the man's house was designed to do any harm to her; in fact, Loona noted that for whatever reason, an odd part of her... began to like it here, though she couldn't exactly put her finger as to why this was the case.

Loona sits alone for a while, waiting for Jim to emerge from the bedroom as he had usually done the past couple of days. An hour had passed, and Jim still hadn't emerged to Loona's confusion. She listened out for any hint of movement from within the room - nothing, absolutely nothing. The tenant grew curious, getting up to head to his room before Jim waltzed his way back from outside, wearing a bright-blue button-up shirt, a pair of beige trousers and his Williams boots, topped off with his accustomed broad brim hat.

"Was wondering when you'd get up," Jim smiled, taking off his hat and hanging it on his hatstand.

"I thought the same," his tenant replied, "Where were you?"

"Oh, matey, I'm an early riser. Was down at the front, just finishing repairing my fence; got a few more pillars and meters to do yet," Jim informed before pouring himself a tin-can of black tea he had made earlier, sipping it briefly.

"I assume you're not planning on doing much today," Jim continued; "Maybe I'll teach you something today if you'd like, keep you from boredom seeming your phone is being stubborn, not wanting to connect and all. How do you feel about carpentry?"

The woman shrugs; "I dunno, really. Haven't ever tried it."

"Never too late to learn, hey? You can bring them CDs and stuff, have something playing in the background," Jim invited, before making his way to the bathroom to wash his face from the grime.

"...Sure," the woman replied hesitantly, not necessarily feeling like doing much; "I'll get dressed first then I'll meet you down there."

Jim replied with a simple "right you are" before making his way back out the house and down the pathway, this time bringing a collapsible folding table with him. After a little while, the stranger made her way down to the entrance of the property, finding Jim with a stack of Timber Pillars and a roll of fencing wire, a large hammer in his hands. He swung the hammer down a few times on the top of the pillar, driving it down firmly into the ground. The stranger approaches Jim who noticed her presence, waving her over.

She put the CD player and CD casing she had down on the folding table and wandered over; "What are you doing here?"

"Fencing," Jim explains; "Gotta do this exact same thing from here to that pillar over there," he details, pointing over to a pillar a good few meters away.

The stranger nods, examining the work he was doing; "So, uh... what do you want to force me to do?"

"Force you?" Jim repeats with a light chuckle; "It's your choice if you want to do something. If you want to, emphasis on "want," I'll let you drive one of these pillars in."

"Alright," the stranger agrees, watching as Jim finishes driving the pillar into the ground before retrieving another one from the pile, bringing it over to another hole in the ground.

He slips the new pillar into the hole, checking to see if everything was aligned with a yellow spirit level he had bought from the shed, alongside his other equipment. After confirming everything was lined up, he hands the large sledgehammer to the stranger who picked it up, not expecting the sheer weight of it!

"Woah— S-Shit! This thing’s heavy as fuck," she exclaimed in a rather surprised manner to the mild amusement of the property owner.

"Hah! It has to be!" Jim went on to explain as he led the stranger over to the newly established pillar, helping her rest the business-end on the top of said pillar, ready to swing.

"Alright," Jim began, gesturing to the sledgehammer's handle; "You've got to swing it back gently, over your shoulders like so, then you swing it as hard as you can back over your shoulder directly on the top of the post. You only have to do it, say, two or three times."

"Got it," the stranger replies, before Jim steps a few feet back, not being in the mood to suffer a blow from a hammer coming full force at him.

The stranger eyes the post before huffing, heaving the sledgehammer over her shoulders, managing to smack the centre of the post with a loud "thud!" as it was driven further into the ground! She swung the hammer back over her shoulders, carefully eyeing the target before repeating the same swing; "THWACK!" In just two swings, the stranger had managed to sink the pillar to a perfect level.

Jim scratches his head, satisfied with his "apprentice's" performance; "Bloody Norah, you're good at this."

"Yep," the stranger simply replies, moving on to the next pillar, steadying herself; "You could say I've had a bit of practice in the past."

"How so," Jim queried, watching as the woman smacked the hammer down once again on the next pillar with admirable strength and precision; "You worked on properties like this before?"

The woman shrugs, grunting as she rests herself for a bit, leaning on the hammer as support; "I did visit a house once, it looked like this one, though I didn't do much work. It was with a friend's family who did this kind of stuff, though they were more ranch owners than anything; I just sort of tagged along for the sake of it."

"Ah, righto," Jim acknowledged, noticing as a police car came casually pulling up to the property from a distance.

The woman, too, stopped what she was doing, watching the car pull up with suspicion and a hint of concern. The car stopped on the driveway, and a singular officer, the Senior Constable from the day before, hopped out and made his way towards Jim and his tenant.

"Oh, Senior Constable," Jim called out; "What's up?"

"G'day, Jim," the bald-headed and aging officer replied, "I'm still alive, don't worry. Look, I'll get straight to the point, I wanted to talk to you about Victor Malloy."

The strange woman sighed, relieved that she was not the subject matter. Jim leaned in, speaking with the Senior Constable. The stranger got back to work, moving on to the second last pillar, the conversation between the homeowner and officer out of her earshot. What she could hear, however, was brief snippets of how the "coroner is baffled" and that "there's no suspects" or something like that. At last, she moved in on the last pillar, drilling it in hard with two hammer blows, before she walked back towards the two men as the conversation finally ended:

"I'll get you to come down tomorrow morning to fill in some 'witness paper' stuff – you know, just for bureaucracy's sake and all that," the officer addressed Jim, before turning towards the strange woman approaching him; "And you, you're behaving yourself, are you?"

This comment took her slightly aback, perhaps taking it a bit too literally; "I'm not going to cause any more problems, nor did I; I was defending myself," she bluntly replied.

The officer waves his hand in dismissal, smiling; "Nah, don't worry about it, just commenting," he replied, before saying his "good mornings" before getting back in his car and driving back into town.

Jim turned back towards the stranger as he picked up the spool of fencing wire, wearing a pair of protective gloves; "Did you hear that? They got no idea how Malloy died or who killed him, other than the obvious," Jim informed his "apprentice"; "They first thought it was the hanging that killed him, then the wound to his leg, or the beatings. Coroner says it's as if he died before he was even hung up and beaten, like he died of shock or something like that, they don't know."

The stranger nods intently, raising one eyebrow; "You don't say?"

Jim shakes his head; "Yep. It's a strange one. I've got to go in tomorrow to fill out a witness statement."

The stranger nods once more: "Alright, cool," she replies, watching as Jim began threading the wire in between the posts, at last finishing the job he had started; "So, I take it your dad taught you how to do all this," Jim's tenant assumed, swiping her gray hair away from her face from all the swinging.

"No, not this," Jim corrected; "I had to figure out how to do fencing myself. My old man merely did general timber work like construction and all that, wasn't necessarily a fencer."

The woman nodded in acknowledgement, shielding her eyes from the sunlight; "argh, this fucking sun!"

"Don't worry, we'll be out of the sun in a minute," Jim assured his tenant; "Almost done with this blasted wire. You can go back up to the garage and I'll meet you there if you'd like."

The strange woman hesitates, dusting her dark gray shorts from some of the settled dirt on them; "Hmm... no, I'll follow you. I don't usually say this about much, but... I find this cool."

Jim turns to the woman after finishing the last bit of wire and begins to pack everything away; "Oh? And here I was thinking you hated this place, and everything associated with it."

The strange woman scoffs: "Never said anything about LIKING it here, just that what you're doing is cool to watch. Personally, using that sledgehammer was fun – was like taking my frustration out on something, or someone, that had done wrong against me, and I was smashing it's puny pathetic little..."

The stranger stops, realizing what she was letting slip, before looking back up from her thoughts to find Jim with his gear, staring at her with a dumbfounded yet concerned look on his face; "You scare me, lady."

The woman coughs, voluntarily helping with folding up the small portable table; "forget what I said."

Jim happily obliged as they both made their way back up to the corrugated iron and steel garage next to Jim's house. The stranger had a proper look inside, examining everything; Of course, there were Jim's two cars, but further in was a large workbench, a variation of tools and equipment stored

on the walls, some stacks of timber neatly piled in the corner for future use, and permanent fixtures such as a drop-saw on the workbench.

"Either you're a serial killer or a construction worker," the stranger remarked, smiling at her own joke.

Jim chuckles, smiling back towards her; "Who's to say I'm not both?"

The stranger rolled her eyes at this attempt at a comeback before closely examining the surroundings, finding an odd fascination in the place. She finds a surprising photograph on the wall; in the photo was what appeared to be a younger version of Jim standing shoulder-to-shoulder with an older man who could possibly be assumed to be his father, standing in front of a large concert hall amongst a crowd of people. From the smaller details of the photo in the background, the stranger could tell that the venue in question was holding a "Guns n' Roses" concert, the photo dated back to around 2016.

The stranger's eyes lit up; "Dude, no fucking way! You did NOT go to a Guns n' Roses concert!"

Jim laughs, putting his gear away as he did; "I sure did! Went with my old man, as you can see. He won the tickets in a bet with his mates."

"No kidding. Fuck, you're lucky as hell," the stranger exclaimed, practically overcome in jealousy.

"Yeah, my dad's a good old man," Jim went on to explain, continuing to put his equipment away in their respective places; "He did his best for me when he could, although I was a rough-head little bastard. Sometimes, with foresight, I get all guilty when thinking about all the shit I put him through with my antics and my snarky attitude half the time. I was an ungrateful little shit, well at least I recognise it now. Sometimes I used to push him away whenever he used to show me affection, which I now really feel guilty about because, well, he always tried his best for me, and..."

Jim paused, finding the stranger looking a bit pensive with herself, her eyes holding a kind of slight guilty sadness within them. She turned to look back outside, wiping her eyes slightly.

Immediately after noticing this, Jim grew concerned; "You alright there," he asked, softening his voice.

"Hm? Oh, y-yeah, I'm fine," the stranger replied, trying to play it off.

Jim's brow furrowed, feeling sorry for the woman; It was obvious she was guilty about something related to what he was talking about, and he had his suspicions on what it was, though chose not to press his tenant on the matter, which was probably for the best. After locking his gear away and a general inspection of his equipment, Jim's tenant and himself left the confinements of the garage, not much else left to be seen in there.

The strange woman looked on into the horizon, that earlier pensive look in her eyes, though Jim could tell she was trying her hardest to suppress it. Suddenly, she asks him a most unexpected question:

"Do you ever get lonely living out here, well, you know... alone," Jim's tenant inquired, looking at him with genuinely curious eyes.

Jim thinks for a minute, staring off towards the horizon, off into the direction of the town centre. He stands there next to her, silently, sniffing slightly and nodding his head. Before he could think of what he was doing, he opened up; "Sometimes, I do. Every now and then I get the odd visitor, but, well, it's no social life. Like, I got mates and a healthy social life, but, well... it's not like I get many mates or anyone properly over for dinner or such. Who'd want to, anyway, with a dullard like me? It's not like I have anything particularly interesting up here."

"...I think you're interesting," the stranger said, a blank expression on her face, her grey hair slightly blowing in the gentle crisp Australian air.

Jim chuckles, looking at her with his hands in his trouser pockets; "Oh, come off it, you're just saying that."

The lady hesitates, sighing briefly before turning back towards Jim from examining the 'Guns n' Roses' CD she had with her.

"No, seriously, just listen," she abruptly replies; "I was hoping you wouldn't hear that, but you've put me on the spot now so, fucking- just listen; You actually are, okay? Like, come on; you live out in a house like this, away from much of the bullshit, and, you know... it's peaceful out here. I don't like admitting shit like this because I feel vulnerable if I say it out loud, but you've put my nerves at ease these last two or so days with your generosity. You've done so much, even if you are slightly

fucking annoying sometimes with your constant talking and ordering me around like I'm your slave."

The tenant hesitates, glancing at Jim with a deeply serious expression, who was listening to her carefully. She clears her throat from it being slightly dry before continuing: "As I am sure you know by now, I'm usually straight to the point, so let me get straight to the point with you; At the moment, I'm stranded here, okay? I'm stuck. I am stuck, and you're the only one I can at least put half of my trust in around here. Okay, that's all I wanted to say – at the moment, you've gained my trust."

Jim froze, processing what she was saying, before nodding in acknowledgement; "I understand, and I'm glad I've been able to," Jim solemnly replies, smiling briefly at her before scratching his chin in thought.

The woman doesn't answer, merely staring off at nothing in particular, beginning to like the serenity of being away from it all. She sighs, turning around and deciding to rest under a tree which was providing adequate shade.

"I'll be here listening to this," she informs the homeowner, gesturing at the CD player; "I want some time alone."

Jim nods; "All good," he solemnly responds, walking back towards the house for a sit down on the veranda. Every now and then, he glances back towards the stranger who was zoned out, listening to the contents of the CD in the distance, still under her tree. The stranger then sighs, tucking her knees in her arms. Even from the distance she looked somber and alone; not necessarily in the physical sense, but her state of mind. Still, Jim was glad that she felt safe for the time being. The rest of the day dragged on, Jim digging and carving a block of wood using his knife as the tenant stayed silent, obviously not wanting to talk much more. Occasionally, she'd come up to him and ask what the time was before making her way to the kitchen to get herself something to eat, usually coming back out to rest under the tree. Day turned to night and Jim had at this time retired to his living room after having a shower and getting himself dressed for the evening. He emerges from the bathroom in his robe and pajamas to find the stranger dozing off on the couch, staring blankly at nothing in particular.

"You alright there," Jim decides to ask for good measure.

The stranger nods slowly with a grunt; "As much as I can be."

"No worries," the homeowner simply replies as he goes to sit down on his accustomed lounge chair as he looked to his house guest, hesitating for a moment before speaking again; "So... did you mean what you said earlier?"

"About what?"

"About you putting your trust in me," Jim goes on to explain as he scratched the side of his face.

The stranger stares at Jim with a blank expression for a brief moment, her eyes focused on him for a couple of seconds before she returns to staring blankly at nothing; "I guess. I mean- what other choice do I have? As I said, I'm stuck here with you. You'll learn quickly with me that if I say something, I absolutely mean it. If I didn't, well... I wouldn't say it in the first place."

"Brutally honest in other words," Jim adds as he flicks through his phone momentarily, trying to think on something else to say. He clears his throat with a momentary cough before putting his phone down, obviously bored of the contents; "Hey, you don't mind if I ask you something?"

The strangers hummed for a split second in reply: "Hm, go on."

Jim leans forward in his lounge chair as he clasps his hands together, looking towards his tenant with a curious look; "You know how after you got impounded at the watch-house yesterday, when you were in the room and you were screaming your lungs out and understandably so because you are in a fucked situation, you called out for... and I know this sounds a little personal, but you called out for your dad- in fact, I heard you call out to him a couple of times."

The strange woman hesitates as he looks towards Jim with a confused look; "Uhh, yeah... yeah I did. What's the question, in fact no; why is it your business?"

Jim puts up his hands briefly in a deescalating gesture; "Oh, no- I didn't say it was my business but I just could tell that, well, I guess naturally, your dad means a lot to you and I suppose it hits close to home for me. No, it's not a question really, just an observation."

Suddenly Jim begins to notice a slightly thoughtful look appear in the woman's expression as she continues to look at him. She shifts in her seat before giving an answer; "...He does, yeah, although I don't like admitting it openly."

"Ah, yeah? Why's that, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Look, I don't like talking about it much, but seeming that you're interested for whatever dumb reason, I'll just say this; He's put up with my bullshit many times and he's never given up on me, which... which I'm thankful for. I've got to be tough in the environment where I come from so I really can't afford for people to get the idea that I'm sort of "daddy's girl" or some stupid shit like that. But in all reality, he does mean a lot to me and I... I miss him," The strange woman quietly finishes as her voice trails off.

Jim nods in acknowledgement of this tidbit of information, knowing that perhaps the topic of conversation should end around about here. Silence filled their surroundings and refused to leave as both the homeowner and his tenant stagnated on any future conversation. On one occasion during this spat of silence, the stranger looks down at her phone briefly to check for some form of reception. For a moment, her eyes light up in a moment of hope as she observed perhaps one-bar of internet connection, only for it to drop out once more to her audible frustration. After running her fingers through her hair, the stranger announces that she would be heading for bed early, with the time being 7:30PM - Jim acknowledges this as he waved her off as she gets up from her seat with a tired grunt and a yawn before making a beeline for her room.

Day 4 - A Most Terrifying Revelation

With an absolute killer of a back, Jim wakes up from within his bed. He groans, feeling his back ache horribly with an overwhelming stinging sensation which was almost paralysing. With a considerable amount of struggle, the pained young man manages to sit himself stiffly upright, flexing his shoulders and neck to knead out the knots before getting up from atop his bed.

"NNGH! FFF-! … Bloody mattress..” the young man whines frustratedly to himself before waltzing out of his room and back into his accustomed living room, then making a beeline towards the kitchen to make himself a cup of coffee; he would need it for today, after all.

He puts the water to boil before deciding to go wash his face from the sleep that had settled within the corner of his eyes. With this intention in mind, Jim sluggishly waltzes back into the hallway and right past the stranger's bedroom, noticing that she hadn't emerged from her sleeping quarters just yet, though he could hear some movement stirring from within which signalled that she had just woken up. Within no time at all, the half-asleep bushman wanders his way into the bathroom, eyeing the water basin before him as if it was the most interesting thing in his life. Before Jim could even turn the faucets hanging over the porcelain structure, he notices a familiar sight within the basin itself.

He froze, taking a closer look; sure enough, there was a small clump of hair resting in the bathroom sink, the all too familiar white and dark-gray hair making its presence known. He picks it up, like the last specimen, narrowing his eyes. Just as his eyes at last began to focus on the item in his hands, the stranger finally made her way out of her bedroom, stretching her arms behind her head in a bid to wake herself up. That’s when she finally noticed Jim behind her in the bathroom, appearing as if he was about to ask her something.

The strange woman froze before turning around to face the presence, staring at him in mild confusion; "What?"

"Hey matey, do you know where this has come from," Jim asks with genuine curiousity, holding the little hairy clump in his hand.

The stranger continues staring at him, seemingly hesitating for a moment on what to say, before answering; "Nope. I- uh... I don't know what that is."

Jim raises his eyebrow in an almost incredulous manner; "You sure? Because stuff like this appearing has only happened since you got here," Jim refutes, trying to get to the bottom of whoever was leaving it behind.

The stranger merely shakes her head, once again "confirming" that she was not the culprit; "Look, can you not interrogate me as soon as I get up? I really don't appreciate that," the stranger grunts to express her unwillingness to talk further on the matter.

Jim throws in the towel, accepting that his inquiry was going nowhere; "Sorry, sorry. I was just asking."

"Yeah, well," the stranger huffs with an almost obnoxious yawn, trying to take the knots out of her hair with a brush she brought into her room; "stop asking so much, yeah?"

Jim shrugs in capitulation , at last washing his face before heading towards the kitchen to finally create his morning beverage. He opts to sit on the balcony, listening as his tenant once again began playing some of the borrowed CDs he loaned to her for free; it was his tenants only form of entertainment due to her phone being rendered useless with no connection, in all fairness. A little while passes, the stranger since opting to make her own breakfast once more, proving that she had become slightly more acquainted and comfortable with her surroundings. Jim half expected her to make breakfast for him in generosity, expressing his expectations to her through a question surrounding the matter. This near futile hope was pitifully short lived when the tenant, with a teasing smirk which radiated pure smugness, responded with a simple yet blunt; "make it yourself, you grown ass man."

After making and eating his breakfast with the "help" of his "companion", Jim gets himself dressed for the day, as usual wearing his accustomed outfit which he had been wearing for practically three days straight, not including the day before. He puts on his hat before announcing that he would be leaving for a couple of hours. The stranger acknowledges with a mere "meh", preoccupied with listening to her music and having a nap within the comfort of Jim's unusually comfortable couch.

An hour had since passed, and by this time, Jim had driven himself in his accustomed "workhorse", doing as promised and heading to the police station to fill out his official 'witness statement'. After having to deal with a few piles of monotonous paperwork and legal agreements surrounding the unusual case, the young bushman makes his way by foot further into town with the intention to purchase some general goods he needed; polish for his Ute, a few bits of canned food like beans and the like, Engine Oil, and as a bit of an afterthought, a pair of new socks.

After being satisfied that he had everything he needed, Jim makes the short hike back to his vehicle, proceeding to unlock the door and hop inside. He takes a moment to sort himself out before adjusting his seat for the drive home, then afterwards slotting the key into the ignition and turning it, allowing the borderline antique vehicle to roar back to life. For a bit of a longer drive, Jim decided in a sporadic decision to take the back roads for more of a pleasantly interesting scenic tour compared to the boring monotony of the asphalt-paved way back home.

It took a couple of minutes to navigate through the outskirts of town, but soon enough he managed to discover the dirt track which looped roughly back to his property in an indirect manner. His Ute sturdily makes its way up the winding dirt road, bumping around on the uneven track as he got deeper and deeper into the surrounding woodland scenery. He was admiring the view, practically within a world of his own thoughts, until the most inconvenient situation began to unfold; the Ute began to quickly lose power and momentum, dramatically beginning to splutter as it quickly lost the ability to accelerate down the weather-beaten track.

"No... no, fuck off, come on... SHIT!" Jim exclaims as he was forced to pull off to the side of the uneven dirt road, though he was certainly careful not to condemn it into the many ditches which dotted the road's shoulder.

After finally parking his now stranded and disgraced vehicle, Jim gets out in an inconvenienced huff, his hands on the side of his hips as he thought quickly on what to do next. After a moment to himself to think the situation through - and a lot more swearing - Jim opts to do the only thing he possibly could within reason. He grabs his keys, locks the car and walks home.

…

Jim, at long last after much tiresome hiking, arrived back to the very outskirts of his lonesome property, cursing to himself about having to walk for a good fifteen minutes back to his house under the beating sun. To add further insult to injury, he had to retrieve his secondary run-down "lemon" in order to tow his beloved, now disgraced, eighties workhorse back home so he could figure out what had caused it to suddenly break down. He thought about this begrudgingly as he walked, deeply frustrated that it even happened at all; if there was one thing Jim wasn't good at, it certainly wasn't handling inconvenience in a calm frame of mind.

This train of thought, however, was lost in an instant after he observed, albeit for a moment, an incredibly strange animalistic shape wander straight through his front door and into the depths of the hallway. Jim suddenly froze where he stood, his mind suddenly trying to process what exactly he had just seen in that incredibly brief moment in time, only able to catch the odd specimen's back

before it finally invited itself in. Then he realised that the lady must still be in the home with whatever this creature was, the thought of which terrified him. The unsettling realisation that the creature he caught a mere glimpse of was also apparently bipedal in nature only served to bewilder him further.

Without a second more of thought, Jim calls out with a weary, booming voice: "Oi, lady! Lady, listen to me; something large and animal-looking has just wandered into the house! I want you to stay as still and as low as possible!"

Slowly but surely, Jim made his way inside, keeping as quiet as possible, retrieving his Lee Enfield Rifle from his cabinet next to the entrance door. He took two clips with ten rounds each, loaded one of them into the chamber before cautiously sneaking his way deeper into the house, his rifle drawn and ready to fire at a mere moments notice.

The young man made his way into his bedroom, the closest room to the entrance: nothing.

Next, he trudged his way into the woman's bedroom: nothing.

Then, into the bathroom: nothing in sight.

Jim was just about to make his way into the laundry at the end of the hallway before he heard floorboards creaking and a harsh gasp emanating from in the living room; the room right next to him. Jim quietly drew his rifle towards the general direction of the noise, steadying his breath to gather his nerves. He stood as upright as he could, and with the greatest amount of caution, walked straight into the living room, ready to confront whatever this “thing” was.

What greeted Jim was the most terrifying and bizarre creature that he had ever seen in his life, standing motionlessly as it peered with wide scarlet eyes at him. The bipedal, wolf-like creature before him had a coat of white and dark-gray fur and was wearing the strange woman's clothing, as well as having, most terrifying and baffling of all… her hairstyle? It had hands which most likely contained claws which could absolutely tear him in half if it ever chose to do so. It had a muzzle with sharp teeth which could very well rip into his throat to kill him almost instantly. Jim froze in previously unimaginable awe and terror, trying desperately to determine whatever the fuck his eyes had set upon. The paralyzed young man's eyes were so tremendously wide and his jaw was locked so unbelievably shut in a terrified clench, his palms sweating profusely as he gripped onto his rifle tightly like his life depended on it. Everything was so uncomfortably silent, until the thing spoke.

"Now, Jim... please, d-don't panic... j-just stay calm, and we can talk ab-"

Suddenly, Jim drew his rifle, aiming directly in between the wolf-like being's eyes for a clear shot of its forehead! The creature gasped in fright at the sudden movement which threatened its life before wasting no time at all, lurching with unfathomable momentum towards the human before it! The creature then grabbed Jim's rifle before he could pull the trigger and threw it away from his hands with unmatched strength, making him yell in blood-curdling terror! Jim slammed heavily into the floor from the might of the creature's brutish strength, stumbling desperately back into a corner before swiftly pulling out a hunting knife kept in his trouser pocket, his throat hurting from all of his terrified incoherent yelling! He tried lurching at the creature - which was begging for him to "calm the fuck down and listen" - which was no use, as like his rifle, the knife was forcefully smacked from his mighty grip, before the bizarre wolf-like bipedal pinned him to the hardwood flooring! The terrifying beast looked him straight in the eye as it persisted with begging its hostage for cooler heads to prevail!

"FUCK!! GET THE FUCK OFF ME!! GET OFF!!" Jim bellowed, struggling with all his might but to no avail. At this point, his nerve broke, tears of fear for his life beginning to run down the sides of his face.

"Listen to me, you dumb bastard, it's me! It's the stranger you saved from the creek! Just listen to me! ARGH!- For fuck sakes, ple-" The creature's plea was cut off as Jim managed to punch it one in its face, making it lurch back in excruciating pain! This moment of quick thinking allowing Jim to back himself into a corner, retrieving his rifle before aiming it directly at the creature!

"WHAT ARE YOU!? WHAT DO YOU WANT?!"

"Fuck sakes, I told you! It's me! I'm that woman you saved!"

"Like shit, you are! You're a freak and affront to life is what you are," Jim bellowed, shaking violently.

"Oh, for shit sakes- I told you to listen! Look, it's me, I can prove it!" The creature pointed to its left forearm, spreading its fur to reveal a puncture-like wound, like a needle point.

"SEE?!" the creature bellowed, "It's me! This is where that fucking needle went, from the Doc! Fuck, don't you remember?"

Jim looked intently at the small scar, calming down ever-so-slightly to observe the evidence. He stared into the creature's eyes, his mouth slightly agape: "S-shit... t-this is you, lady? Is that really you?"

"No, it isn't, it's the landlord, I'm here to evict you. Of course it's me, you dumbass!" the thing remarked back!

Jim lowered his rifle from the steadfast aim he initially held it in as be breathed deeply, thinking on what to say next to an already fucked-up situation. He allowed himself to stumble back onto his feet, using his Lee Enfield rifle as a crutch; "R-right- I see-... What the fuck, I knew there was something odd about you! I fucking knew it!"

Jim was shaking badly, his nerves shot and his joints aching from his efforts to break free mere moments ago. He tried to get back up onto his feet, only to stumble back onto his behind, prompting the creature to try to slowly approach him. This attempt to help him only prompted Jim to briefly aim the rifle back towards the creature, glaring at it with a stern and terrified look. He coughed a bit, finally gaining his balance again, before speaking once more in a calmer yet still obviously petrified tone of voice.

"Now, tell me!" Jim demanded most urgently, "What exactly are you, lady? In fact - no - you haven't even told me your fucking name! And I've known you for what? Three, four days now??"

The creature stood frozen, trying its best to ease the situation. It stood down, raising its hands into a deescalating stance, showing Jim that it had no intention of causing him any harm.

"You're not going to believe me, but I'm a... look, I'm a hellhound-" the thing attempted to clearly explain, before being abruptly cut off by the nervous man on the opposite side of the room.

"A fucking what?! You better not be pulling my leg matey, because if you are, I will turn your head into a fine fucking mist!"

"I'm not, for fuck sakes! I mean, look at me! You really think I'm anything other than that?!" The hellhound barked right back, seemingly insulted by the fact Jim has so brazenly insinuated she'd lie about such a matter!

Jim hesitated, looking at the mean looking son-of-a-bitch up and down, still trying to come to terms as to what in this blessed world has wondered into his home, or rather what has been living in his home for the betterment of a couple of days!

"N-no... No, I don't...," Jim finally admitted to the hellhound's relief, now reasonably calmer than he was seconds ago. "Now, for goodness sakes, your name! What's your name?! If you at least tell me your name, maybe you'll regain my trust in you that bit more, deal?"

The beast let out a defeated sigh, her helplessness in the current situation very much stressing her out; if this was anyone else pointing an ex-military weapon at her face, they'd be most certainly dead already. She loosens her nerves to the best of her ability, and answers with a nervous swallow of her dried throat.

"Okay, okay!! Okay, I'll tell you, just- for fuck sakes, just don't shoot me... Loona. That-That's my name! There, you happy now?!"

Jim nodded slightly and rigidly, his eyes still fixated firmly on the woman: "Loona... r-righto, so that's your name... I-it's a pretty name, I'll give you that much..." Jim swallowed with his dry throat which was still painfully sore from his panicked, incoherent bellowing moments before. He takes a swig of a whiskey bottle next to him, his palms still shaking. He swallows it quickly with a brief cough afterwards, and asks his next question, perhaps the most important...

"So, tell me, lady, and you tell me honestly... you're not going to kill me, are you?"

The woman huffs in a rather impatient manner; "Fucking- no! I'm not going to kill you!"

"Is that fuckin' so?! How can I trust you, huh?!" Jim demands, staring down the beast.

"Because if I wanted to, I would've already done it!! Like, shit, you saw how easily I overwhelmed you a minute ago," the beast replies, frustrated with the slow progress being made to deescalate the situation; "Besides, you saved my life! Now, why would I want to kill someone who literally saved my life?"

Jim hesitates, feeling himself calm down, lowering his aim once more towards the floor; "Nah... nah, you make a good point, there. Now, please... here's the deal; I'll put down my rifle, and you sit down in that chair there, yeah? I will sit down, too- We'll both do it at the same time- BUT- and I cannot stress this enough, we will do it slowly!"

The hellhound almost immediately nods, desperate of a deescalation herself; "Okay, deal!"

Both parties begin to slowly make their moves collectively; the woman sitting down, and Jim lowering his rifle next to the chair adjacent to him. After the woman had fully sat down, Jim, too, sat down in his respective chair. They both relaxed significantly, though not enough to reduce the tension completely from the air.

The room was silent, only the faint buzzing of the light in the living room interrupting the tense situation. A fly hung about the woman's head, making her ears flick from the buzzing. She observed Jim, his left leg bouncing, his posture tense within the chair he sat in. Small beads of sweat gathered on his forehead as he wiped them away with his fingers.

"Shit... shit, this is unreal, this is some absolute... I don't know..." Jim spluttered, looking once again towards the lady adjacent to him, a couple of feet away.

"Hey, look," the lady replied, fully turning her head towards Jim, "I get it; I'm scary looking, I understand- and I guess I understand as to why you pointed a rifle at my face. But look, I'm not going to harm you in ANY way."

Jim's gaze darted to meet hers: "I guess-... guess that's obvious now, and I'm glad." Jim was considerably calmer now, though a hint of disbelief and fear still rang out in his voice.

Jim wrapped his fingers against the armrest, before asking his next question: "So... so why are you here in the bloody first place, something like... you?"

"Would you believe that I was after Victor Malloy?" The female hellhound asked as she tried shooing the persistent fly away with her hand with success.

Jim scoffed in a bit to find humor after the sudden altercation; "Hey, look, I reckon I can believe anything at this point. What, you wanted to kill him?"

The creature pointed her finger at Jim, snapping her fingers as well; "Congrats, you figured it out."

Jim half-laughed in a nervous fashion, wiping the sweat from his brow as he felt himself getting increasingly calmer, yet the situation he found himself in was still so unbelievably tense; "Well, I suppose you missed the chance, then; fucker's dead, as we discovered. So, I guess you can, well... go back now?"

The hellhound froze briefly, her brow furrowing with concern: "Well... you see, that's the thing; I can't. I can't manage to because I left something important behind, and no – not by a car or anything like that, something more supernatural if you know what I mean. I don't think anyone can get to me either for whatever reason. You know, the ONE time I go out on a job, and fucking- I get stuck like this, a literal worse case scenario! I've tried everything, but... well, I'm stuck here, for the moment I guess, w-with you." She looked down, her face growing slightly pensive and concerned, her voice growing quieter.

Jim turned to the concerned hellhound, feeling somewhat sympathetic; "Well... I'm sorry to hear, I suppose. Sucks to be away from home, I get it. But look - I know we barely know each other next to a bar of soap, but you've got a temporary home here, I-I suppose if you look at it that way."

The homesick hellhound nods slightly to the assertion, looking back up towards Jim with a slightly troubled expression still on her face; "S-sure, I suppose so... and, well, I want to thank you for that... a-and for finding me in that creek. Oh, and, I REALLY don't ask this often, but... say sorry to that, uh, doctor for me - for being so abrupt."

Jim couldn't help but lightly chuckle, waving his hand slightly in an almost dismissive manner; "Nah, don't worry! He doesn't care, really; Price has had much worse things said and done to him over the years. I get it, though, so I'll let him know."

The hellhound sitting across from Jim felt obliged to express her appreciation, managing to squeeze out a simple "thank you" before returning to complete silence. Both the homeowner and his bizarre tenant sat within their collective silence, before Jim offered the woman a glass and his whiskey bottle that had been resting directly in front of him on the coffee table. The peculiar, human-esque dog woman instantly obliged, taking both containers and pouring herself an almost full glass.

After much anticipation, the silence was broken when Jim leant forward in his seat to rub his aching spine; "NGH! Uff- bloody Norah, my fucking back! Fell hard there, didn't I? Thanks to you

practically body-slamming me into the ground there."

The hellhound scoffs at the remark while shooting him a smug glance; "You had a literal gun and a knife, I had to!" She explained with a small grin before taking a swig from the bottle and discarding the glass, obviously yearning for a much larger serving of the alcohol which had the texture of pure, nourishing liquid gold.

"Yeah nah, that's fair enough," Jim capitulated as he took a sip from the glass of whiskey he had resting in his lap before holding the container in his fingers, coughing from the strength of the beverage he had drunk down like clear crystal water from a natural fountain.

"Wait a second... so THAT's why I've been finding fur in my ruddy bathroom sink," Jim remarked, turning back towards the lady with a smirk.

Loona smirked in return, her brow raised slightly; "Yep, that would be me! I would say I'm sorry for that, but I'm not," she smugly remarked, finishing the contents of the near-empty whiskey bottle.

Jim rolled his eyes; "Yeah, nah, whatever you say," he remarked in return, managing to finish his glass in roughly the same span of time as his curious tenant.

The pair of them returning to sitting in complete silence, Jim taking the empty whiskey bottle from Loona and discarding it to the coffee table that was between them. Loona, meanwhile, briefly checked what appeared to be her phone, scrolling through with that familiar look of pensiveness in her eyes.

This caught Jim's curiosity; "Ey up, what's that then?"

Loona glanced at him briefly with a blank stare; "Just my phone."

Jim raised his eyebrows, perhaps oddly curious by the contents in an almost intrusive way; "What are you looking at?"

Loona rolled her scarlet eyes and sighed; "Just photos. What, you want to look at my personal shit?"

Jim held up his hand; "No, no! I was just... just curious, you know?"

The 'hound hesitated for a minute, looking at Jim in thought. She maintained her gaze before speaking again; "You know what? Sure, if it means that much to you. No shitty remarks about them, though, ok," she demanded.

"Of course," Jim swore with utmost sincerity; "You have my word!"

Loona hesitated once more before capitulating and gesturing for him to come over, albeit begrudgingly. Jim does so, still with a sore back, and stands next to her to look over the hellhound's fur-covered shoulder. Loona proceeds to show off a picture that peaks Jim's curiosity, but not before being briefly startled with the contents; in the centre of the photo was Loona herself, surrounded by three other equally strange looking individuals with their skin pigmented with a rich red. He squints, studying the unusual nature of the article.

"I take it these are your folks," Jim inquires, baffled even more in an already baffling situation. There was one word that appeared prominently within the bushman's mind as he examined the unusual specimens photographed alongside the six-foot hellhound; that word was 'imp-like', in both their stature and perhaps even their nature.

Loona allowed herself to let out a brief laugh; "Hah! No, not in relation anyway. They're kinda... like associates, I guess? Though I tolerate their existence - to say the least."

An apparent chuckle left Jim's mouth, obviously finding humor in the disparaging comment; "Nah, I know what you mean! I have a few of those types myself I have to deal with."

"Yep. Hey, at least someone gets it! I mean, yeah; they're just associates, but sometimes... I know this may sound fucking stupid, but sometimes they feel like a weird... family, in a way? Well, at least that taller one thinks so," Loona informs the onlooker, gesturing towards one of the figures contained within the group photograph.

Jim grunts, acknowledging the information with serious thought, no matter how bizarre it sounded - this whole thing was bizarre, with all things considered; "So they mean that much to you, hey?"

This suggestion managed to catch Loona slightly off-guard. Never once before had she ever considered that they *meant* something to her; "Uh... I mean- Yeah, I suppose so. They tolerate me, and I tolerate them. I guess I'm grateful for that? I don't show it often, though."

The man grunts once more in acknowledgement, being able to tell that these pictures held sentimental value. Silence once again filled the room, Jim once again returning to his seat before deciding to take a glance at his own device. The screen lit up to reveal that the time was now 12:30PM approximately. This is when he was quick to realize.

"Oh, shit, my Ute!" Jim suddenly exclaims as he practically sprung right up from respective chair; "That's why I came back here by foot! The old bastard's gone and carked it a few miles from here, got to tow it back here myself."

"Huh. So that's why I didn't hear you arrive back," the hellhound was quick to realize; "Well shit, I guess I'm sorry to hear."

With this renewed prompt to act, Jim quickly gathers his keys and begins heading out of the living room, before he stops just before the hallway: "Oh hey, Loona? Y-You interesting in tagging along at all? Get out of the house a bit, got to do some shit anyway. Could teach you how to shoot pigs. How's that sound?"

The hound hesitates for a minute, looking up from her phone to consider the available options; "I mean- that sounds gross, but... Eh, fuck it, why not? Sure, I'm down."

"A-Alright," Jim acknowledges while gesturing outside; "I-I'll be in that car near the shed over there."

And with that, after retrieving with his rifle and hunting knife, he walks out the door, still pondering to himself as to whether this was real or not; The persistent thudding pain in his back and shoulder told him that this was very much real, whether he liked it or not. Although the situation was very much in Jim's hands, fear and anxiety about this surreal development still clung onto his mind. Still, the bipedal specimen hadn't tried anything funny when she clearly had the opportunity, the fact of which began to put his mind at ease - or at least as much ease as possible.

"A hellhound..." Jim muttered in utter disbelief to himself in a breathy tone of voice as he stepped off the veranda and onto the dust-ridden dry earth, a grave chill running up his spine at the mere mention of the word; "I-I picked up a fucking hellhound... Jesus Christ..."

Jim made it to the shed a few paces away from his home, opening the door begrudgingly to find his lemon; another Ute, this time from the mid-2000s in age, weather-beaten and worn, its white paint faded and blotchy from perhaps years of work. He unlocks the door which allowed him to climb inside before turning the ignition key. To his honest surprise, it starts, albeit with a momentous struggle. The still nervy young man manages to back it out cautiously from where it rested and parked it in the front of his house where he found the female hellhound waiting for him on the porch. As he pulls it to a stop, she gets in on the passenger's side while apparently judging the exterior appearance.

"You know," Loona begins commenting in an almost judgmental fashion, as if she was giving a critique of every minute detail she could possibly find; "You could've at least cleaned it up a little if you planned on using it. I mean, come on, you're humiliating yourself by even driving it like this."

"That's the thing; I never do," the driver manages to wryly chuckle; "I am not kidding when I say that this thing almost didn't make it out of the garage just now! It's only fifteen years old and it runs like I've dug it out of a ditch."

Loona couldn't help but laugh along to this remark herself; "You're kidding. That bad?"

Jim responds with almost immediate confirmation; "Yup! That awful," he explains before shifting the vehicle into 'Drive' and releasing the handbrake with a moment of struggle, allowing for the vehicle to coast down the beaten track and towards the main road before them. Small nervous beads of sweat accumulated atop Jim's brow as he gripped both hands onto the wheel with such firmness that his knuckles had turned near white. It was painfully obvious to anyone that saw him - especially his curious passenger to the left of him - that he was still so unbelievably terrified. As the weather-beaten vehicle coasted along the asphalt with moments of loose rattling, Jim couldn't help but dart his eyes on occasion between the curious specimen to his left and the road ahead.

It wasn't long until Loona began noticing his painfully obvious apprehension, beginning to doubt his ability to drive in such a condition. After a moment of stagnation, the hellhound decides to speak up; "Fuck sake- Can you just relax before you kill us both in a car wreck? You're starting to make me nervous!"

In a testimony to Loona's natural ability to be intimidating, the driver physically jump within his seat in fright, perhaps due to the way the hellhound carried her near-aggressive voice; "I-I am! Just-fucking hell, give me a moment to get used to this!"

This startled reaction from the human caused Loona to let out a guttural sigh as she propped her head against the headrest, her remarkably scarlet-red eyes tilted up towards the roof. Within her mind, Loona was quick to realize - albeit begrudgingly - that it was necessary to improve her manner of speaking towards the human to her right. Although she had deep-rooted reservations about the idea of having to accommodate herself for anyone - let alone a mere *human* - it wasn't as if she didn't understand how he felt; meeting someone of her kind wasn't exactly an everyday thing for any human. That much was for certain, if not painfully obvious.

With this though in mind, Loona let out a soft sigh before deciding to speak up again, this time in a much softer tone to accommodate for his nerve; "Okay, look... Don't get me wrong, I understand that you're still terrified of me, okay? A-And I said before, I get it. But hear me out on this one; as long as you don't attack me, I won't attack you. Capiche?"

"...Got it," Jim almost instantly replies as he rigidly nodded his head. Although these words did provide comfort, he wasn't entirely sure just yet on how genuine they were; "A-And how about this; If you don't attack me... I won't attack you, yeah? Have we... have we got a truce? A-A deal?"

In an effort to regain Jim's trust, Loona immediately nods along to the plan; "That's what I had in mind, so yeah. We got ourselves a deal."

"D-Do you want to shake on it-"

"Not now! Not now, just please; focus on driving, okay?"

"Oh! Right, of course! I-I'm focusing!"

Silence once again took hold within the interior of the vehicle with both parties satisfied with the second round of negotiations, though for different reasons entirely. Loona returns to staring blankly outside as the scenery rushed on by. It was only when she realized the direction that they were heading did the hellhound become apprehensive about their apparent destination; "Hang on... W-We're not heading into town, are we?"

"N-Nah not into! But towards. I'm not that crazy, with you looking like... well, that – no offense, though."

"Pffft- none taken," the passenger was quick to reply, completely understanding Jim's intention with the remark.

"We're going to pull off to the left here at this dirt road coming up," Jim states, indicating to the left before pulling into the beaten road; "This is also the road where the other Ute's gone and carked it, just up a little way from here now. We'll tow it a little later on, so we'll go and park alongside it."

"You're the boss," the hellhound responds in apparent compliance to Jim's order while she observed her surroundings with mild interest.

After a few minutes of driving along the same weather-beaten track Jim had hiked from to return home, the car pulls up to the unmistakable, familiar shape of the grey vintage Ute, pulled off to the opposite side of the road. This is directly opposite where Jim parks the white lemon on the other side of the dirt path, turning it off and getting out with a lightly-exaggerated heave; "Well here we are, then! Follow me, and I'll show you how to be a marksman."

"I'm not sure about being a marksman," Loona states, getting out of the car, "But I do know how to hunt, being a hellhound and all."

"No kidding," Jim responds, grabbing his rifle; "But here, we want clean shots. We don't want them torn apart and mangled; too messy and unprofessional, at least for me. I like to do it quickly and painlessly for them."

"Well, good for you," Loona replies, gesturing her hand in front of her; "Lead the way, then."

Jim nods and waves Loona onward, walking down into the bush. The grass was tall, though dry, and the trees hung over them, providing them cover from the beating sun. They walked a good couple of metres for what felt like two minutes until they reached a clearing in the trees, surrounded by dead fallen trees and an abundance of sticks and foliage. Jim props his rifle onto his shoulder and observes the area.

Loona observes as well, before asking impatiently: "So, what, we wait for these hogs to come to us, or...?"

"No, not necessarily," Jim replies, looking north, "Just got to find out the general area of where they are... and I think I just found one, over there," he points into the trees, a black mass trudging along in the distance.

"Quiet now," Jim whispers, gesturing for the hellhound to come over and observe. "Now, watch this..."

The man aims his rifle slowly up to his shoulder and leans up against one of the fallen trees. The hog, oblivious to the danger, briefly looks towards the marksman. Jim breaths in and out slowly, steadying his shot, before squeezing the trigger; "BANG!" The crack of gunfire briefly startles Loona, as well as being followed by a distant thud as the black mass slumps down.

"And that," Jim lectures, "Is how it's done; clean, swift, and little struggle."

"That's cool and all," Loona nods, "But it takes out the fun of it for me. As I said, I'm a 'hound, I like one-on-one hunting."

"As you keep saying," Jim replies, wiping his brow briefly. "Well, how about this; next one we see, you go show me how it's done, yeah? Hey, maybe you'll teach me something."

Loona raises her brow, considering the proposal. After a moment of glancing around the treeline encasing them, she nods; "Sure, sounds like a deal. This will get gruesome, though."

"I can't wait," Jim remarks with a wry laugh, unsure of what he expected to see.

The pair wait there for a good few minutes, the air around them quiet and still. Birds hung around in the distance, singing their bush song. This was up until another black mass, larger than the last, rocked up to the scene to the east. A massive boar, probably a quarter of Jim's height, approached the clearing slowly, observing the two hunters.

Loona eyes the fat mass with intent; "Watch this," she warns with a menacing, toothy grin as she prepared to strike like the predatory being that she was.

A few seconds go by, until the hound suddenly lurches forward with unbelievable haste, startling the boar enough to make it stumble! It had little time to react until the ferociously brutal hellhound bit down hard into its fat neck, making it squeal in pure excruciating pain! Jim watches in complete awe as the mass is then pinned down, its neck bleeding profusely from where it could, before being thrown around and hitting the trunks of trees with a loud ***"THUD!"*** until it became limp after much hopeless struggle!

"Fucking hell! Shit!" Jim bellows in awe; "That's awful!"

"What," Loona turns around, wiping her mouth from the excess blood that had stained the corners of her mouth and teeth; "It's dead, isn't it?"

"Yeah, well, I'll give you that," Jim replies while gesturing towards the bleeding, lifeless mass; "But bloody hell, why go out of the way to do it like that!?"

"Because it's fun," the hellhound concedes, barely seeing the problem with the way she liked to kill her prey.

"Eh, fair enough." Jim shrugs in return before approaching the hellhound with a piece of woolen cloth. "Need a rag for the blood?"

"Thanks," Loona replies, taking the loose rag offered to her before wiping the blood from her mouth.

The pair sat down shortly afterwards on the dead mass of trees where they could, observing the environment and enjoying the quiet which accompanied them. On occasion, there'd be another unsuspecting wild boar in the distance to which either Jim would shoot with profession or Loona would go after with remarkable brutality, to the entertainment of the hellhound and to the awe of the man, making him laugh in utter disbelief.

After roughly an hour of hovering around in their chosen place of rest, there were a total of seven dead hogs; some mangled nearly beyond recognition, and some which were at least granted a more

dignified death. It was early afternoon at this point, and both man and hellhound were spent from the day's work. They took the time to sit around and relax once more, a peaceful wind passing through frequently which served to cool them both down.

"So, are you enjoying this?" Jim asked, taking a sip from a tin water canister he had bought along.

"Honestly? This is fun. Most I've had in a while, to be completely honest with you," Loona comments, dusting her clothes and fur off from the settled dust.

"Hey! I'm glad," Jim laughs, cleaning his rifle; "Keeps you off that ruddy phone, doesn't it?"

The hellhound grunts to this sly remark as she rolled her eyes; "Yeah, yeah, shut up. So, anyway, I gotta ask; why do you kill these hogs?" Loona inquired, observing the pile of bodies with mild interest.

"Ah, well, they're a pest around here," Jim gladly proceeds to educate; "They kill wildlife, they terrorize local farmers, and it's also my job to kill them. About 500 dollars a head is the price they pay me, so it pays well."

"Shit," Loona thinks aloud; "Maybe I should take it up."

Jim chuckles; "Maybe you should! You could be my business partner, perhaps?"

"Hm! Maybe."

They both sit in silence once more as they looked aimlessly around them, a crow settling down next to the pile of hogs, picking at the bare meat. Jim was quick to shoo it away, telling it to emphatically 'fuck off' before it takes flight.

"Hang on, Jim?" Loona decides to alert Jim out of his momentary daydreaming, a sudden question appearing in her thoughts.

"Hm?" Jim looks up, blinking a couple of times after momentary closing his eyes with the intention to doze off in the afternoon sunlight beating down upon them.

"I'm sorry for asking, but, how old are you?" the now curious hellhound inquires with genuine interest; "No reason for asking, just wondering."

Jim takes a swig of his canister once more, wiping his mouth afterwards; "I'm twenty-two years old, why?"

Loona side-eyes the shabby-looking marksman with her brow raised in slight astonishment, seemingly taken aback by his age; "Really? You're that young??"

"Yep! Why, is it because I look like I wash my face with sand?"

"W-well, now that you put it that way, yeah!"

"What about you, then," Jim inquires in return, "How old are you?"

"Oh, I'm the same age," Loona replies; "twenty-two."

"Ah, I figured," Jim acknowledges, nodding to himself, taking off his broad-brim hat and dusting it off. He rests it in his lap afterwards before propping up his rifle in his lap.

Loona, meanwhile, continues to look at her phone, scrolling through whatever she was viewing. That familiar look of slight pensiveness on her face once again returning. She sighs briefly, before putting it down. Jim looks up, somehow knowing what was on her mind.

"You miss them, don't you?"

Loona nods, running her hand through her hair. "Mhm... I can't even get onto them. Phone's completely useless, and I don't know why. ... Fuck, this is hopeless..."

Jim nods sympathetically, moving slightly towards her, using his Lee Enfield as a crutch. He extends his hand towards the 'hound. Loona hesitates, shifting away from it. She thought about it for a few seconds, before holding onto his hand very begrudgingly.

"Don't worry, yeah? I'm sure they're finding a way," Jim tries to reassure to the best of his ability.

In spite of her most pessimistic predictions for how this situation would end, Loona manages to nod meekly; "I hope so. Also, just so you know, I don't do this whole physical contact thing often. Just for future reference."

The man acknowledges this, letting go of her hand; "Oh, no worries. Apologies."

Loona waves her hand; "You're fine... thank you, though."

"No worries, don't mention it. Happy to help where I can," Jim reassures.

The hellhound nods once more before lying back a bit against her respective dead tree. Jim does the same while looking off into the distance at nothing in particular. At last, peace had filled the air, and both man and hellhound felt content with their surroundings. A good fifteen minutes had passed before Jim made his first move, using his rifle to help him stand back up. Loona followed suit, getting up with a stretch, before they began carrying the boars to throw them at the back of the Ute they had traveled in. After the load was secure, Jim hooked his disgraced gray Ute to the back of the 'white lemon', as Loona got in the passenger's seat, waiting to go. After being sure that both loads were secure, he got into the driver's seat, started the engine, and set off once more for home. At long last, with some small talk along the way, they returned to the house. Loona went inside as Jim reassured her that he didn't need help to store everything away.

The hellhound made herself at home once more in the living room, sitting in the chair she had sat in as part of their 'peace negotiations' hours before. She sunk into it, closing her eyes briefly. She felt once more at peace. Of course, there was the matter of going back to her true home, but for now, at least, Jim's home was hers as well; To have a temporary firm location was what mattered, and for Jim's generosity, despite everything, she was very much thankful, perhaps even in his debt she could never repay.

After a couple of minutes alone, she heard Jim walk in and slump in the chair next to her. He sighed, taking his boots off; "Well, look at us; back to square one," he joked, referring to the chairs.

Loona grunted, half-laughing: "Indeed we are," she responded, running her fingers through her gray hair once more.

"So then... what now, ay?"

The hellhound across from Jim shrugged, weakly throwing up her hands as she let out a soft, almost disparaging chuckle; "You wanna know something? No offense, but I'm starting to think that you have *no* concept of doing absolutely nothing. Every single time I see you, you've always got something in your hands or you're outside sweating like a pig!"

In response to this criticism, no matter how applicable it may have been, the bushman let out a wheezing laugh in an almost dismissive manner to Loona's critique; "Guess I've never been used to resting! You can scoff at it all you'd like, but I like to call it 'having work ethic'!"

"Okay, fair point, you do you! But come *on*, dude; you HAVE to give yourself some leeway to do sweet fucking nothing," Loona rebuked in a light-hearted manner, almost as if she was finding this exchange oddly amusing.

"Righto," Jim scoffs in return, getting up for a moment from his chair to waltz towards the kitchen. An attentive yet relaxed Loona watches on as the human returns from the confines of his kitchen with a tall bottle of brandy and two glasses; "How about this? We have a drink, for our.. successful hunting trip today, huh?"

"Hm! Sounds like a plan," the hellhound gladly obliges with a halfhearted smirk, grabbing one of the glasses and allowing the human to fill the old-fashioned glass on her behalf.

At long last, Jim slumped himself back down into his respective lounge chair, pouring himself a few drops of the expensive alcohol before leaning back into his seat in a relaxed fashion, proving to Loona that he could - in fact - give himself some leeway to do "sweet fucking nothing" as she put so elegantly. The pair of them sit in silence for a while, the serenity of this old timber house drowning out any outside disruptions. Jim checked his phone once more as Loona stared outside at nothing in particular. The silence was broken, however, when a noise was heard...

"PING!"

Jim looked up, and so did Loona, trying to find the source.

"Was that you," Loona asked Jim, turning towards him.

"No, not my phone," Jim confirmed, double checking his notifications. Suddenly the realization hit; "Hang on... was that..."

Loona's scarlet-red eyes widened, suddenly sitting upright in the chair, grabbing her phone quickly with such force that she almost threw it across the room. She stared at her screen intently, desperately trying to confirm whether it was her.

Loona's mouth sat slightly agape, her eyes wide: "It's my phone... it-IT'S MY PHONE!"

"You're joking," Jim exclaimed; "Who's it from? Is it a message?"

Loona desperately unlocked her phone, her hands shaking with a sudden rush in adrenaline. She read the message with haste and desperation, reading every single word at the rate of a hundred miles per hour. After seemingly reading the message in its entirety, a slight smile from the hellhound’s agape mouth appeared.

"T-they're coming for me! THEY'RE COMING FOR ME, JIM! They know where I am! They can't come right away, they're still trying to figure that out- but- but they'll be here SOON," she exclaimed, her voice echoing throughout the house! Loona fell back heavily into her lounge, her arms to the side as a huge sigh of relief escaped her lips; "Oh thank fuck! I'm going home!"

Jim smiles widely, happy for his tenant. This was the first time since he saw Loona this ecstatic since she found her; "That's great to hear, chief! Congrats!"

As suddenly as she began celebrating, Loona was quick to take control of her composure, clearing her throat before pivoting her head towards the human. "If you tell them I was this happy for them to come get me, I will obliterate you," she demanded, perhaps half-joking.

Jim holds up his hand, placing one hand on his chest as if he was making a vow; "You have my word that I won't, I promise; to get on your bad side would be a death sentence."

"And-... and thank you, for everything," Loona replies, placing her palm on her forehead, thankful that the ordeal may soon be over.

Jim raises his hand as a gesture to say "no worries" before enacting upon the feeling that he needed to say more; "Hey, I'm glad you're returning home, after the shit you've been through here; It's crap being homesick."

An intrusive thought suddenly appeared within the young man's mind, causing him to ponder upon it. If anything, the notion that has appeared within Jim's mind was almost baffling to him, and he wondered if he even should express it at all. Despite his personal reservations about the topic, Jim decided that it wouldn't necessarily hurt to put it into words. He hesitates a minute, working up the courage to speak once more, before continuing; "You know, Loona.. despite our.. glaringly obvious differences and, well, your abruptness at times... I personally think that - and forgive me for saying this - that we may have a bit of an.. odd kind of.. working mate-ship between us. Or I suppose as you'd call it.. a-a friendship, of sorts."

Loona couldn't help but freeze at the suggestion, removing her palm from her forehead and looking up slightly with an inexpressive look on her face, as if she had been stunned by what Jim had just had the courage to express. To the hellhound, it almost seemed entirely bizarre that someone, let alone a simple *human,* would remotely begin to think that they could be... *"friends"*, or *"mates",* as per the local dialect. Even the word *"friend"* seemed entirely alien to Loona, as if Jim was speaking in incoherent tongues. Usually, the notion of someone being friendly towards her would evoke a visceral reaction from within her, but this time... this time was rather different; this *entire* situation was different.

Nonetheless, despite her hesitation, Loona at last gave her final verdict on the matter:

"... I... Usually, Jim, I would've kicked someone right square in the face, and or dick, for even *suggesting* something like that! But... You know what? Fuck it ... I think so, too," she responds, turning her head towards him with a smile spread softly on her face; not a disparaging grin or a provocative smirk, but a genuine, heartfelt smile.

Jim smiles warmly in return, taking a swig from his glass of lukewarm brandy. He looks towards the sunset in the window, past Loona, peering out to the west. The last light before sunset gave off a mesmerizing pink and orange hue over the horizon, the scattered clouds reflecting the light. Suddenly, Jim's brow furrowed, getting up from his chair and walking to the window, albeit with caution.

Loona notices this and looks towards his general direction; "What?"

Jim, with his back towards the hellhound, replies quietly; "Come look at this."

Loona hesitates, before getting up and moving next to him for a spot. Jim points to the tree line in the distance; "You see this?"

In the distance, between the trees, was a mass. The mass was obscured by shadow, but whatever it was, was tall and resembled something humanoid. It stood there, seemingly looking outwards into the trees, though where it was looking was up to debate.

"This isn't one of your mates, is it," Jim inquired to the 'hound, who was looking as intently as him at this figure.

"No..." Loona replied, "...No, this is something else... What is it?"

"I don't know," Jim explained, "But I've been seeing it since I moved in a couple of years ago."

Loona squinted, getting uneasy at the mass' presence; "So, do you know anything about it?"

Jim shakes his head; "I've heard stories, though, of distant shit in that bush. Partially the reason why I have that rifle in the first place. Don't get me wrong, you're scary enough as it is, but this... this is something else."

The sun was really setting now, and the mass was getting harder and harder to see. Loona tries to convince Jim to go after it, having her as backup, before Jim shoots her a concerned yet firm look, giving her a simple "I wouldn't do that." In that split second that they both looked at each other and

turned again to look at the figure, it had vanished. They try finding it again, but to no avail, leaving them both dumbfounded and unnerved.

An uneasy silence filled the room before Loona tried to change the subject onto the subject of dinner, to which Jim obliged, nodding slightly; "I'll fix you something. I'll be in the kitchen, but if anything comes up from that tree line again, let me know," he asks, glancing through the window once more before heading to the fridge.

"Got it," Loona agrees, looking out once more before carefully looking back to her phone, giving slightly uneasy glances back outside every now and again.

After a good half hour, dinner was served, a steak sandwich. It was plain, but it would suffice. Loona chowed down on hers to the slight bewilderment of Jim, whilst he ate his at a slower pace.

"Do you know how to chew food, mate," Jim inquired, watching her almost scoff down the contents of her plate.

Loona looks up, one side of her brow raised: "What? I'm hungry."

Jim shakes his head, chuckling: "Fair enough."

Dinner was soon enough eaten, with Jim chucking the plates away into the sink, planning in his head to get around to cleaning them – whenever that would be. The sun had gone down at that point, and the rest of the evening until bed was made up of small talk, lengthy conversations about nothing in particular, shots of brandy, and stories shared by both man and 'hound.

After a while of lively conversing and checking briefly outside for the possible presence of the earlier black mass, the two of them said their goodnights, before setting off to bed, though Jim, still somewhat weary of the earlier sighting, waited on the veranda for roughly an hour with his rifle for any possible intruders.

Day 5 - Bloody Norah, Another One?

The next morning came, with Loona the first to wake up. Groggily, she checks her phone for the time: "5:36AM" it read. She groans, still trying to wake up, staring at the ceiling. Loona looks outside, the morning air forming a ground-level patchy fog over the terrain, obscuring parts of the horizon. It looked gorgeous, she thought to herself, almost peaceful. At last, she gets up, throwing the sheets off of her. Was she going to make the bed in question? Probably not.

Rubbing her back, Loona leaves her bedroom, across the hallway and out the front door onto the veranda. The air was slightly cooler that morning, almost crisp. Through the window behind her was Jim's bedroom, curtains drawn. Through the crack, however, Loona could tell that he was still waking up, sitting upright with his back to the window, about to get up. She turns back around, looking outwards into the ranges towards the summit.

Thoughts ran through Loona's head to keep her from boredom; not bad thoughts, more like thoughts about this strange place, this part of the world that before she would not have even dreamt of going; though after five or so days of being essentially trapped here, she thought of how it seemed to grow on her. Loona enjoyed it, the serenity and quiet of the plains and scattered trees: She smiles briefly, thinking on this - Through her fucked-up moments in her life, this was a place that would be perfect to reflect in.

After a while, Jim groggily walks out the door as well, sitting on a chair on the opposite side of Loona's sitting position. He had come out with a coffee, gently sipping on the hot contents before sitting down. He nods to the hellhound; "Morning to you."

The adjacent hellhound looked to her left, nodding to the caretaker of the property: "Morning."

Quiet once again settled. Loona begins to check her phone once more, remarkably able to connect to the internet again. Brief snickers left her mouth, finding humour in the contents of her screen, before settling back down with her signature blank expression.

"Hey," Jim finally says, looking towards the hound, "I got to take those hogs down to Roy's joint. Do you want to head into town at all, get something if you need?"

"Eh, might as well," Loona confirms, "I'll just change myself to my guise, and I'll be out shortly."

Jim nods, throwing his hand up in acknowledgement. Loona heads back inside to prepare herself for the day. Jim was already prepared, kitted out with his usual attire, shirt, trousers, boots; he was an early riser, after-all.

After a while, Loona arrives back out onto the porch, this time in her human guise, running her fingers through her hair to take out the knots as best as she could; "Ready when you are."

"No worries," Jim replies, getting up from his chair. He grabs his rifle and leads Loona back down to his run-down piece-of-shit lemon from the day before. They both get back in, and with a brief splutter and a bit of cursing (to Loona's amusement), the car starts once more, making its way back down the beaten path, onto the main road and right into town.

Small talk once again broke out between the two, in some cases continuing conversations that had taken place the night before where context and subject didn't necessarily matter. These moments of conversation further proved to the both of them that, indeed, there was an active, though unexpected friendship developing between them. After unloading the group of dead boars from the back of the Ute, with Roy making his awe known about the seemingly mauled ones, the two parties went their separate ways briefly: Loona heading to the service station, and Jim heading to the gun store for extra ammunition. After a while, they both met back up at the Ute, and made the return home.

"So then," Jim started, rubbing his hands from the cold whilst holding the wheel, "Got anything planned, or just the usual?"

"Oh, just the usual," Loona replied, without taking her eyes off the screen, "Just hanging around, being a tumour on your property."

"Oh, shut up," Jim replied, laughing, "Don't be like that. You're fine, besides, a mate's got to help out a friend."

"Whatever you say, boss-man," Loona scoffs, still looking at her screen with a keen fixation.

Suddenly, the Ute begins to splutter once more, the shit-box finally seeming to have carked it at long last, or at least for the umpteenth time. Jim begins swearing, cursing the bloody thing, before finally pulling on the side of the road.

"Déjà vu, huh," Loona teases, smirking at the frustrated man next to her.

"Don't laugh too soon, matey," Jim half-jokes in return, "We're both going to have to walk back home if this fucking thing doesn't work."

He unlocks the bonnet of the Ute, wanting to confirm his suspicions of the cause of his least favourite's issue. Jim first checks the dipstick, making an unusual discovery; no Oil, which to be honest was his fault for not checking beforehand, though to save him the humiliation, he wouldn't mention this mistake to the occupant of the passenger's seat to save him from mockery.

Suddenly from the distance, a loud crack was heard, startling Jim so much that he hit his head on the underside of the bonnet, making him briefly wince in pain. He rubs his head, looking into the direction of where he thinks the source of the noise came from. He could see as well that the sudden noise also alerted Loona from her phone, who was now looking intently into the same direction he was.

Another thunderous distant clap was heard, followed this time by a sudden "WHOOSH!" past his ear; a stray bullet! Jim quickly lurches back, cowering behind the other side of the stranded Ute!

"SHIT! Loona, get the fuck out of there!" Jim bellows, trying to peek over the other side to get a clear view of their attacker!

Loona scurries out of the car, cowering behind the car alongside the driver; "What the fuck was that?!"

"Someone's out for us, that's what that is!"

Jim grabs his rifle from behind the driver's seat after making a mad dash to retrieve it, once again under sudden pot-shots, one almost hitting his leg, only to then have it penetrate the side of the car, hitting the engine! With every opportunity he could, he returned fire to the general direction, though the long grass and foliage in the distance didn't help him find exact locations.

Loona tries to peek over the now bullet-ridden car to get a closer look at whoever was firing at them! Through immense stress from the situation, she manages to peek over into the distance to briefly see a familiar shape in the distance, trying her hardest not to get hit. Her eyes widen, her mouth slightly agape, before finally yelling at the marksman next to her.

"Wait a minute, stop shooting," she cries, placing her hand on Jim's shoulder to his sudden surprise; "I think I know who it is!" Loona begins waving to the general direction: "STOP, FOR FUCK SAKES!! YOU'RE ABOUT TO HIT ME YOU DUMBASS!!"

"What are you doing," Jim asks desperately, dumbfounded.

"It's them!" Loona replies, still waving her arms, "It's those guys from the photo I showed you yesterday!"

"That's them?!"

Jim very briefly lowers his rifle, ceasing his return fire, though still keeping his head down, fearful of their true intent. If this was truly them, what intention would they have with him? He didn't have to wait long as the tall grass began to shift, a shape quickly moving towards them, calling out Loona's name loudly with desperation and... relief?

Trying to look over the bonnet, Jim spots a shape rush out of the grass, and across the road. He lifts his head further up, only to be met with a sudden pressure on the back of his head, cold steel.

"Hands up, fuck-stick!"

He shoots his hands up, surrendering; "Shit-shit, don't shoot!"

He then feels himself being thrown to the ground, an object pressing into his back, forcing him head-first into the dirt! He grunts in pain and distress, trying to see whatever the hell was forcing him down. He manages to catch a glimpse of his captive, an odd creature, arguably odder in appearance than his passenger, with a scarlet pigmented skin, dressed in a suit of sorts.

"Hey, hey, what the fuck, he hasn't done anything!" Loona bellows to Jim's attacker, approaching the scene by the sounds of things.

"What did he do- WHAT did YOU do to my Loons!?" The unknown attacker demands, further pressing the muzzle in the back of Jim's head.

"FUCK- I didn't do anything! She'd have my head already if I did-," Jim tried to explain, before being kicked in the side with force, causing Jim to bellow out in pain!

"OH, I swear, fucko, I'm this close to blowing your fucking brains ou-"

Suddenly, the pressure from the back of his head was swiped away, as a hand firmly grabbed the barrel, pulling it away from the incapacitated Jim.

Loona came right up to the face of this sudden intruder, baring her teeth and wearing an incredibly angry look: "BLITZ, I said stop! Are you fucking dense!?"

Jim's brow furrowed; "Blitz? W-who the fu- Oh shoot, you must be Loona here's associate! Mate, please, I absolutely swear, nothing happened here! I-I absolutely promise you! I've been looking after her whilst you couldn't get here!"

The newcomer darted his piercing gaze up towards Loona, with her nodding, confirming Jim's testimony. The figure nodded slowly, bringing Jim back up onto his feet with a heave, Jim's clothes now covered in dirt and a hint of mud, a few ants crawled over his forehead. The newcomer dusted Jim's ragged clothes, and patted him on the shoulder: "Okay, bucko, I apologise... at least for the moment."

Jim examined the freakish looking specimen in front of him now, lurching back in hesitation: "Bloody hell, you're more disturbing than you are in the photos," he remarked, though now was most likely not the time for those.

"Call me whatever you like, but don't get too witty just yet," the specimen replied, poking Jim in the chest; "Sorry about your car, by the way."

Jim scoffed; "Nah, don't worry about it. It's a piece of shit, anyhow."

"Name's Blitz, by the way," the newcomer announced, stretching his arm out for a handshake, which Jim flatly rejected.

"Not the type to shake hands with folks that shoot at me, matey."

The newcomer retracts his hand, rolling his eyes; "Well damn, I'm sorry for wanting my fucking *DAUGHTER* back!"

Jim looked up from dusting his clothes off, hesitating, and swiftly looking back up with an incredibly baffled look on his face: "Your what? Okay, this is getting strange really quick!"

"Look, it's a long story," Loona piped in, "Probably too long, but yes – he's... sort of my parental figure, I suppose."

A dumb-looking smile spread across the red and white creature's face, his pupils dilating as if he had received the best news in his life.

Jim darts his gaze back at Loona with a squint, still trying to get used to this very new information which had only developed within the past couple of minutes. He shrugs, dusting the dirt from his hat before finally putting it back on: "Alright, I guess it is what it is. So, like, what's happening here; you are taking her back home, or...?"

Blitz thinks for a few seconds, observing his surroundings; "You know what? No, not yet. I quite like this place; I guess I'll stay for a while longer. Hey! Why don't you lead us back home, then?"

"It's a bit of a walk," Jim explains; "If you don't mind walking."

The creature shrugs, swinging his firearm over his shoulder before gesturing his hand in front of him; "Lead the way, you big damn hillbilly!"

Jim shoots the creature a deadeye look at the name-caller before grabbing his rifle and keys before leading the other two parties, confining the finally dead lemon to the side of the road. He leads them off the path of the road, up an old trail obscured by dense trees and bush, making small talk with this newcomer in order to make sense of this situation he was in. As they were all walking through the trail, Loona returned to her true hellhound form. As well as this, Jim was being bombarded by interesting, albeit stupid, questions from the new arrival about his life, his rifle, and his attire which especially annoyed him.

At long last, the party arrived back onto his property, up the slight hill and onto the porch, with Blitz remarking of "how neat" the place was and was thinking of "moving in"; this prompted Jim to shoot him a look of "don't even think about it" before setting some general ground rules about visitors to his house, which the newcomer begrudgingly agreeing, albeit with coaxing from Loona to cooperate. Jim led them both into the living room, providing all, including himself, with something to sit on. He takes off his hat, still rubbing his head from the impact of himself colliding from the car bonnet.

"You got a great set-up here! So, you've been holding my Loons captive here, have you?" Blitz interrogates, staring the homeowner down with intent to harm if necessary.

"Fucken- No, she hasn't been held captive here," Jim emphasizes the point "She's gotten her own room and bloody everything, helped me with pig shooting the other day."

"Hunting, hey? Well shit, sweetie! Didn't know you were gun-inclined!" Blitz admits to Loona who was beginning to mindlessly scroll through her phone, effectively disassociating with her surroundings.

Loona seemed rather incredulous; "What? Blitz, you've *seen* me shoot a gun numerous times before, what the fuck are you talking about?"

"Oh, she didn't shoot them; more brutalized them – mauled them to death, you should've seen it!" Jim corrects the imp, chuckling through his teeth while running his fingers through his hair momentarily.

The newcomer laughs, grinning; "Oh trust me, big man, I think I can imagine! By the way, Loons! Didya find Malloy?"

"Oh, we found him, Jim drove me up there," Loona concedes; "He was dead before I got to him, it looked like a couple of days before I arrived."

"Ah, shit! They gotta die at the right time, don't they?" The newcomer exclaims, sighing in disappointment.

"What can you do, matey? Anyways, have this and calm down," Jim butts in, offering the visitor a shot of brandy, to which he accepts quickly, downing it down in a few seconds.

"How did you end up mooching off this guy for his home? Not that I have a problem with it!" Blitz eagerly asks Loona, leaning forward in his seat, his chin resting in his palm.

Loona looks away briefly, finding something to say; "Okay, don't freak out, but... well, you see..."

"Found her in the creek down here, suffering from heat exhaustion, to put it mildly," Jim intervenes, answering the question for the hellhound.

"What!? No, no, oh fuck- oh fuck- Loons I'm so sorry! W-what happened- a-are you okay? I-I'm so sorry! The fucking portal wouldn't open, a-and I-"

The visitor desperately stammers and haphazardly tries to explain, staggering over to his 'daughter'. He collapses before her seat, landing on his knees and becoming lost for words, anguish and guilt painted on his face.

Loona shoots Jim a piercing look, with Jim raising his eyebrows and shrugging.

"What? Had to tell him the truth."

"THIS is why I was hesitating, you idiot," Loona scolds, before turning her attention to her 'associate'; "Blitz, look at me, I'm fine! He saved my life! I swear, I'm fine! ... DAMMIT BLITZ, STOP CRYING!!" She exclaims, trying desperately to get the nervous wreck out of his sporadic episode.

It took longer than reasonably expected, but after a "brief" episode of just about going insane with the thought of possibly losing, essentially, a part of his 'family', Blitz calms down at last, picking himself up. He then turns around and desperately thanks the larger fellow behind him, with Jim in question repeatedly reassuring this visitor that 'it's all good' and 'no worries' before handing the visitor another shot of brandy to loosen up. The new shot glass and its contents in question disappeared from his hands and out of the small shot glass in a matter of not even half a second.

"Just a minute; Loona, aren't there another two of you?" Jim inquired, not particularly wanting to meet them – besides; two of them was enough for him.

"There is!" Blitz butts in, finally calm enough to function from his brief panic attack, "They're dealing with some other bullshit I don't think your little brain would comprehend."

Jim nods in acknowledgement, examining Blitz's most bizarre rifle. He judges it with intent, squinting at the smaller, more bizarre details such as the seemingly strange optics and the odd paint scheme. He leans in a bit closer towards it, Blitz noticing this curiosity. He picks up his firearm to the brief surprise of Jim before Blitz shows it off to the homeowner, boasting about it.

"I know, big guy, it's impressive and all that! A killer, isn't it?"

Jim raises his brow, scoffing; "It looks like a toy, matey," he remarked, to the amusement of Loona who snickered with a wide smirk in the background.

This left Blitz taken aback, sneering at the grinning man; "A toy? A fucking *toy*?! This *"toy"* has slaughtered hundreds if not thousands! It would ABSOLUTELY, GUARAN-FUCKING-TEED turn your head into jello!"

Jim chuckled loudly; "Yeah, nah, I don't doubt that if you didn't miss all your shots."

"WARNING Shots, you retard!" Blitz was quick to correct, folding his arms and slumping back into the chair.

Loona intervenes, still finding this amusing; "Easy now Blitz, calm yourself. Well shit, why don't you prove it to Jim that it's that good?"

"You can't be serious, Loonie; prove it to this clown?!" Blitz gestured to Jim, who was polishing his respective rifle. Suddenly, Blitz thought about it, then changed his mind most likely due to his bruised ego; "You know what? Sure. Fine. As long as the missing link here also agrees!"

Jim shrugs, unperturbed; "Sure thing, boss-man! Go on, we'll go Pig Shooting tomorrow, yeah? Out into the tree line over there. If you can take down one of the largest ones out there, then I'll concede that you're as great a marksman as you are short."

"What, a few fucking hogs? Big challenge, big man!" Blitz scoffed, with Loona rolling her eyes in the background, sneaking a picture of her disgruntled parental figure to capture this little temper tantrum.

"Oh, you'll see..." Jim responded with a blank stare; "Anyhow, the both of you have got all day to reunite and catch up, so I'll leave you to that. First thing tomorrow morning, we head out."

Jim then gets up, bringing his Lee Enfield; "I'll be in the garage if any of you need anything," Jim announces to the hellhound before making his way to tend to his much more beloved Ute, now his only car which was still temporarily out of order.

"Blitz, do you have to be so obnoxious," Loona criticises her dad's demeanour, turning her attention from her phone.

"Oh, so I'm have to take shit from him, do I? Come on, Loonie, you have to admit it - he's an asshole!" Blitz pitifully deflects.

"All he did was call that thing a 'toy'." Loona replies as she gestures to the firearm now in Blitz's arms.

"You *KNOW* how much I love this thing, sweetie! This "toy" is my kick-ass lethal pride and joy!" he deflects, still holding onto it in his lap protectively like his life depended on it, which to be fair it did in terms of his line of work.

As the hellhound and imp reunite and catch up from within his home, Jim gets to work on his Ute, a tin-cup of water in his hand. After opening the bonnet followed by a little bit of examination, it was almost immediately clear that a general engine failure had occurred, mostly due to shot spark plugs. He grunts, rummaging around the shelves to find a set, to which eventually he does. Half an hour passes and brief moments of tending to his precious Ute, entranced and fixated deeply in his task, a sudden wrapping on the steel door alerts him. He puts down his gear and approaches the door, opening the doors with a brief heave as the hinges creaked with signs of age and weathering; It was Loona.

"Yeah mate, what's up?" Jim asks, opening the door fully.

"Hey, look, Blitz wanted to ask you if we could go up to Malloy's home," Loona explains, getting straight to the point.

Jim raises his eyebrow; "Ah, yeah? Why's that?"

Loona shrugs; "He just said he wanted to scope it out, see if there was anything he could take."

Jim scratches his cheek, thinking about it: "Ah, you know what? Sure. Not like I got anything else to do. The Ute's up and running again, but problem is that, well... not gonna lie to you, I don't wanna be within ten feet of that shortarse. He'll have to hold on in the back."

"Alright, cool," Loona replies, heading back up into the house to relay the message.

Contrary to Jim's claim, the Ute was capable of holding three people with a space in the middle for a third party. Jim knew this for a fact and so did Loona, though Jim's staunch reluctance to even share a seat with this overzealous asshole of an imp prompted him to tell a white lie to avoid having to in the first place.

After swinging both garage doors open, Jim turns back to his Ute and gets in, turning the ignition to be met with the car finally starting after its breakdown. He sighs in relief and shakes his head; "things I do for people, I'm too bloody nice," he thinks to himself, before slowly driving out of the garage.

The pristine-looking Ute pulls up on the gravel track once again, parking in front of the veranda. He gets out to retrieve some gear, as well as to check on the current situation which he was still very much getting used to; he still hadn't gotten over the fact that he had been accommodating such a strange being as Loona, let alone having another one accompanying her now.

He gets inside, finding the hellhound giving Blitz a run-through of the things that have happened to her since both Jim and her met. Blitz himself had a multitude of questions, such as "has he hurt you in any way" and "was she severely ill in any way" which Loona was getting increasingly frustrated with answering, possibly due to how repetitive and frequent they sounded. Despite this, she knew that it was only coming from the goodness of Blitz's heart. Jim interrupts the middle of the conversation, announcing that he was ready to go, to which the both of them obliged, most likely to the relief of the 'hound.

Blitz was the first one to begin leaving, but not before sharply stopping in front of Jim, darting his gaze directly at him, stabbing his finger into Jim's chest; "I'm watching you, big man; no funny business with my daughter, ok?"

Jim raises his hands with a blank expression; "No worries," he conceded, sighing.

Loona follows suit, with Jim being the last to leave, as the three of them get into their respective places, Loona in the passenger's side, and Blitz, begrudgingly, in the back tray. Jim heaves his way into the driver's side and shutting the door. Once again, he starts the engine, and the pseudo-entourage sets off.

"I see what you mean by 'overprotective'," Jim remarks, gesturing to the passenger outside in the tray.

Loona sighs, looking outside; "He doesn't mean it, I know that, but fuck! Well, look, he's kinda better than what he used to be. This situation's fucked up his nerves, so I understand."

Jim nods, understanding completely as well.

The drive doesn't take too long, just a good half-a-dozen or so minutes of driving, weaving off into the beaten gravel and dirt track, up towards Malloy's old home. They pass the tree they found his body in, the body in question long since gone. At long last, they pull up into the front of the property, parking up near the entrance, which leads down a slight embankment to a quaint, now derelict, house.

Jim gets up and out, so does Loona, as Blitz eagerly leaps out of the tray and rubs his hands, making his way down the beaten pathway.

"You know, this is the first time I've ever been up so close to his property," Jim explained to both members of the trio.

"First time for everything! Hey, Loonie! I'll take the front, and you check the surrounding area for anything interesting," Blitz dictates, making a slight jog down the embankment, Loona following slower but closely behind.

Jim, meanwhile, checks his ammunition, and brings his Enfield just in case. Whilst the duo check the surrounding property, with Blitz making the most noise with his pillaging and searching, Jim leans by a nearby tree, checking his watch for the time. He sighs, looking up into the sky above before getting a closer, more intriguing look into this once very mysterious property. To the left of him obscured by an especially thick collection of foliage was a timber shed, perhaps even a stable, obviously run down and about to fall apart. He peers through an especially rotted part of the entrance doors, looking inside with curiosity. Nothing too much of note could be seen at first glance, but on the wall around the back, obscured by debris was a gun mounted to a wall, what Jim swore could've been an old-fashioned Lever-Action Rifle.

This discovery prompted him to try and break in, attempting to kick the door in; it didn't budge. Instead, he opted for tugging it open; he firmly held the handles of the door, pulling it hard a few times before the lock, which was barely hanging by a thread, disintegrated, the doors swinging open. Jim cautiously attempts to walk in, observing the surroundings, just old tools, and other indistinguishable objects. He was just about to walk right in when he felt his foot trip over a taut rope, which released suddenly. He stumbled forward a bit, briefly losing his balance, as he felt something swing right by him, over his head, barely missing him!

Jim gasps, gaining his footing once more and finding a gruesome discovery, in awe and relief; What had swung by him was a long plank of timber with a large, rusty machete blade embedded right into it.

He gasps, calling out to both of his accompanying entourage; "Oi, Loona, Blitz! Come look at this out here!"

Loona was the first to arrive at the scene, growing wide-eyed at the makeshift death-trap; "Woah, what the fuck?"

Blitz followed suit, somewhat oblivious to the swinging machete blade at first, before finally noticing it, a large, smug smile spreading on his face; "Ohohohoho! Hoo, boy! That's fucking good!"

Jim examines the contraption, gesturing at it to Loona; "You see what I meant by 'he's dangerous'? That could've been you at the end of this thing."

"Well, shoot, now I'm glad he died before I could try and kill him," Loona re-evaluated, briefly shuddering at the thought.

Blitz approaches it, examining the absolutely 'genius' details into it; a trip wire on the floor, leading up to the ceiling, with a release lever; "I think I'll take note of this in future! Like, shit, how haven't I thought of this before?"

Jim, meanwhile, approaches the dusty lever-action rifle, though remarkably in better condition than he thought. He dusted it off, only to reveal very minimal dust; "Oi, Blitz – I think this may interest you as well," he hints, handing the rifle with one hand to the imp-looking creature.

Blitz examines it, peering with one eye and holding it up to the sunlight; "You are a very good judge of character, big man. Not the smartest and probably borderline challenged, but still a good judge!"

Jim pretends to not hear it, moving on with the next question; "So then, what did the both of you find?"

Loona replies, shrugging; "Nothing much, just some suspicious-looking stuff, rotten food, and a literal huge mound of who-the-fuck-knows from I don't know who or what around the back. This place is a literal dump!"

"I say we torch the place to hell," Blitz chimes in, pulling out a lighter, to which both man and hellhound immediately reply with a resounding "No".

Jim looks towards the unkempt house, the doorway smashed in presumably by Blitz's reckless plundering. He notices something rectangular near the front entrance; "Hang on a minute, what's that?"

Loona looks over, following Jim's gaze; "What, that box?"

Jim approaches it, followed closely behind by the accompanying duo. He cautiously opens it, in awe of the contents. In it was a group of long and faded tubes, covered in dust. He reads the odd labels with what appeared to be caution signs, before he realises the contents; "Holy shit, these are explosives!"

Loona examines them closer, before backing away with sudden caution and worry that they might blow up with the slightest of movement, whilst Blitz was much less cautious, grinning widely.

"Oh, come on, please, we GOTTA use these," an excited and charismatic Blitz exclaims, looking in the house itself; "If we can't torch this popsicle stand, at least we could blow it up! You know, rig it up full of this good shit."

Loona rolls her eyes, knowing this was perhaps a very fucking stupid idea, whilst Jim, though at first hesitant, made his judgement clear:

"...you know what? Fuck it, let's do it!"

Loona glares at Jim, dumfounded; "What the fuck- don't encourage him!"

Jim turns towards Loona as he makes his way to the crate; "Encouraging him? No. I guess I'm treating myself; encouraging your old man here is a by-product."

Loona scowls: "Okay, first off, he's not my 'old man', and... you know what? Just do it, not like I can stop either of you pair of dickheads," she capitulates, leaning on a nearby tree, though growing somewhat curious of the final results of this "genius" idea.

Eagerly, Blitz grabs some sticks of explosives, running into the house to plant them wherever he felt was suitable. Jim went for a slightly different approach, choosing to stick them around the windows and door frame, as well as around the railings surrounding the balcony. Loona, meanwhile, took a picture of these two "braindead dipshits" with her phone, a slight smirk breaking out from her otherwise blank expression.

After a little while, Jim had fixed them all into place, making a light jog back to the de-facto rendezvous point, followed by Loona; a solid stack of hard timber which somehow hadn't rotted away. Blitz followed afterwards, at last retreating from their target, hopping over the timber stack and peering over.

"Ready when you are, big guy," Blitz announced, preparing himself.

"What," Jim replied, confused; "Who's igniting the fuse?"

"Thought you were, seeming this is your idea," Blitz remarked, deflecting the responsibility, looking at him momentarily before refixing with his gaze to the house.

"What? Fuck off, this was your idea. Hey look, seeming that this is *YOUR* idea, you go light the fuse, or..." Jim sighs heavily, hesitating; "Or you could use my rifle to shoot at one of them, considering that you're such a bloody good shot."

"Oh, so NOW you admit it," Blitz scoffed; "You're not as dumb as you lo-"

"Can one of you just fucking do it already??" Loona chimed in, becoming highly impatient with the time-wasting arguing.

Blitz chuckles, grabbing the rifle from Jim's very reluctant hands; "Ohohohoho, you got it! Watch this, fucko..."

Blitz steadies the rifle, getting used to the feel of the wooden stock. He breathes in and out slowly, before he finally pulls the trigger.

BANG!

Followed immediately by the gunfire was a sudden vibration from the accompanying explosions, as the rotted and abandoned home spontaneously combusted, sending glass and timber flying in numerous directions! The sound was deafening as the trio desperately ducked for cover, most of the debris flying directly over them, damaging surrounding trees! After a couple of seconds, all that was left was a massive pile of smoking debris, a huge pile of rubble.

Jim chuckled loudly, followed by Blitz, whilst Loona merely watched in overwhelming awe at the dramatic aftermath.

"WHAT. THE. FUCK!!" Loona finally exclaims as she calmed herself down from the spontaneous adrenaline rush, "That was insane!!"

"It was fun was what that was, Loonie!" Blitz chortles, whilst Jim finally composed himself from the rush of excitement and stood back up.

"Okay, sure! I'll give you that! But now we've alerted EVERYONE from a thousand-mile radius," Loona exclaims once more, taking a shaky and unfocused photo of the aftermath.

Jim waved his hand, still laughing; "Nah, nah, don't worry about it! Nobody ever comes up this way anymore! Besides, fucking- who's going to care that the piece-of-shit's house is now gone!? We've cleansed this bushland!"

"Okay, that's a good point," Loona concedes, chuckling at the remark.

"So! That's us then," Jim concedes, making his way back up the hill, "I guess we'll head back, yeah?"

Loona shrugs; "Well, I guess so. Are you coming Blitz, or are you going to- WOAH WHAT THE FUCK?"

Blitz was busy stuffing a few sticks of the same explosive in his pockets; "What? I think I'll make good use of these in future!"

Jim, noticing this, gets a shock: "*OI!* NO, you are NOT bringing live fucking dynamite onto my Ute!!"

Blitz capitulates quickly, tipping the explosives out with a disappointed grunt, following both Jim and Loona back up the hill to the dirt road. They discovered, fortunately, that the Ute had not sustained any damage, but there were very small chunks of debris that landed from the explosion scattered around. One by one, they all boarded up once more and made the trip home, Jim once again being the driver, Blitz inspecting with deep fixation the rifle he had plundered from the home and Loona, taking a brief photo of herself, perhaps thinking of saving this moment.

Arriving back home, the party heads back inside, Jim once again retiring to the living room briefly before retreating to the kitchen to fix something up. A brief lunch was served, that being leftover steaks from the evening before. Jim, exhausted by the day, practically collapsed into his lounge chair. He dusts off his clothes briefly, before noticing, from across the room, a very hushed and private discussion between the reunited "family." He tries to listen in, growing suspicious. Loona's facial expression held a baffled look on her face, mouthing off the sentence "what did you do this time", her brow furrowed, whilst Blitz seemed to emphasise something important to her.

Jim thought that he heard something about "staying here" from Blitz before he decided to interrupt, perhaps rudely; "I'm sorry, what?"

Blitz turns around, scratching the back of his head, obviously meaning to break something to the human; "Oh, ok, uh... yeah- look, I need to... well, I need to ask you a favour, big man... hehe, mmm- fuck..."

Jim leans in, listening; "Jesus Christ- Go on..." he insists, bracing for something outlandish.

Blitz stutters a little more, not sure if he should say it, until Loona cuts in; "Blitz has gone and pissed someone off back home and now they want his head. He wants to stay here for a couple days," she sighs harshly, obviously annoyed at this very new development.

Jim stutters, dumbfounded, scowling at a nervous Blitz; "I'm sorry, I beg your pardon? So, you come here, render my Ute defunct, point a gun at my head whilst I'm down while threatening to blow my brains out, mock me, and NOW you want to stay here, free of charge??"

Blitz stares off to the side, rubbing the back of his head: "Yesss...? Look, Jim-boy, please, I-I need to ride this out a couple of days at most- look, only tomorrow and the next day!"

Jim glares at the stuttering imp, shaking his head, before pointing his hand at Blitz's direction; "First off, matey, don't call me 'Jim-boy', and second of all, if you want to stay here, you're going to have to work for it, yeah?"

Blitz desperately nods his head; "Y-yes of course! Anything you need!"

Jim hesitates, thinking about what he could get him to do, before shaking his head; "Look, we'll sort it out tomorrow – cross that bridge when we get there."

The afternoon passed quickly, Blitz trying to explain the situation to Jim who could barely catch on to anything he was saying, whilst Loona interjected here and there to spell it out for Jim, who although still didn't understand the situation, nor did he really want to, he still got the gist of it in the end; something about 'killing the wrong guy' earlier in the year and something else about money owed to somebody, finally coming back to bite Blitz in the arse or something like that.

The rest of the afternoon was made up of that brief spontaneous banter, brief arguments between Blitz and Jim over perhaps the pettiest of subjects, and lectures by Blitz and Loona about what their line of work was, and who exactly these people that wanted Blitz dead were. At some point, Jim admitted that all of this was probably much more information than what he ever needed;

”Immediate What professionals?”

“Murder, you dumbass; M-E… uh, M… how do you spell murder again, Loonie?”

Loona almost instantly obliged by literally spelling it out for the imp as she continued to glare down at her phone, getting mildly frustrated at times whenever the internet chose to drop out again.

“Huh… well shit,” Jim remarks, taken aback by the severity of the imp’s line of work; “I hope I don’t end up as one of your targets,” he half jokes.

Blitz waves his hand in a gesture at Jim’s concern; ”Nah, don’t worry big guy, you ain’t worth anyone's time... Oh wait! Do you have anyone you want us to go after? Anyone you want dead-”

”No, mate, I don’t; I’m not putting a black smudge against my conscience and my name, especially one as big as that,” Jim firmly assures with a stern look.

As per usual for his antics, Blitz didn't quite get the hint; "Oh, come on! There has to be someone, at least one motherfucker you want us to turn into a disheveled and unrecognizable corpse-"

"Blitz, he doesn't want to. Why can't you take a hint," Loona bluntly interjects without turning her eyes away from the screen, at last being able to use the internet with a solid connection.

"Well excuse me for wanting to expand to new horizons, Loonie; it's called being an... what's that word I said around a week ago?"

"Entrepreneur," Loona helps the borderline illiterate Imp along, briefly looking up from her screen after seemingly attaching the newest selfie of herself to somewhere.

Blitz clicks his fingers and then points to Jim's direction; "Yeah, that word! I like it to be honest; should use it in more sentences!"

The evening, too, was spent virtually the same way – nothing of note happening, except Blitz perhaps going way too overboard with the alcohol that had been on offer, managing to create a cocktail of rum and brandy in a tall glass to the morbid curiosity of Jim and the utter bewilderment of Loona who warned her "old man" numerous times not to even think about downing it. Blitz, thinking he knew better, did so anyhow, and within minutes passed out blank onto the couch. After confirmation by Jim to a concerned Loona that the imp, in fact, hadn't died, they both hauled Blitz onto the couch, which was to be his "bed" for the evening anyways.

Jim made his way onto the balcony, with Loona coming out a little while later after confirming for herself that her paternal figure would be okay. The night was cool that evening, Jim looking out into the remarkably clear night sky, leaning on the railings. Jim turns towards Loona and nods in acknowledgment of the hellhound's arrival, Loona doing the same in return. They both stood in silence for a while before Jim finally spoke:

"So, that's your dad, hey?"

"Well, as I said, biologically, no. But he is my… my adoptive dad, I guess," Loona responds with a little bit of hesitation, staring up into the night sky in admiration of the calming and tranquil sight before speaking again; "Blitz has been there for me, though we've only known each other for a couple of years. He does try his best with me and I do appreciate it, though as I said, I don't show it much – I don't like to. Wait no, scratch that, thinking about it further, I'll be completely honest with you… I don't act like I appreciate it at all, to be completely blunt. I guess it feels like I'm letting my guard down if I do, making myself more vulnerable than I ever should be," Loona explains as she looks down slightly at nothing in particular.

Jim nods slightly as he scratches his chin, thinking on what to say in response; "I see… why's that then?"

Loona abruptly sighs in defeat as she turns her gaze up towards the horizon again, her scarlet eyes shifting in serious, deep thought; "Look- I really don't know - or maybe I do. Hell, it probably sounds like an excuse for myself when I say this next bit, but… I really didn't have anyone to look to growing up and I guess the feel of having someone there for me is so… foreign. It still doesn't feel like it's genuine at times, as if this is all just a pretty sweeter-than-shit dream that's going to just disappear the moment I wake up."

"So, I'm guessing you've had a rough upbringing then?"

Loona looks up, turning towards the young man next to her briefly, a ponderous look in her scarlet eyes maintained in her thoughtful gaze before she looks back towards the horizon; "Look- I really don't like talking about it, but yes."

Jim softly exhales through his nose for a moment, still looking at Loona as he tries to figure out on what to say next. He coughs slightly to clear his throat before speaking again; "You know, Loona... excuse me for giving some advice, but you can let your guard down for your dad – as I said a couple of days ago after that fight between you and them braindead fuckheads in town, you're not as big and mean as all that, I can tell."

Loona glances back towards Jim, confused; "What do you mean?"

Jim shrugs, facing her gaze; "Well, it's sometimes harder to tell, but you do care about him. You got your folks close to your heart; that was evident when you weren't sure if he was going to come

rescue you – you were lost without them. I know you don't always show it, but maybe try loosening up around him. Even if it's just once in a blue moon, just tell him; 'thank you for everything'."

Loona looks back into the house, down the hallway, as Jim continues:

"I was like that with my dad for a period when I was in my teens a couple of years ago. I got to the age of, I think, seventeen when he had a health scare, and I visited him in hospital. For whatever reason, I just thought that was going to be the very last time in my time here on earth where I'd get to speak to my old man. I was desperate to talk to him and let him know how I truly felt about him."

Jim paused briefly, deep in thought, before swallowing and starting again:

"And... and I just told him straight. I said to him, 'Dad, I love you, stay with us.' I think you should probably open up to Blitz for even just a minute, because I can tell you love him as much as he loves you. It'll not only make him feel better about his massive, albeit flawed, efforts to help you out as his daughter, but I assure you, it'll greatly benefit you as well."

Loona looked back at Jim with ponderous eyes, deep in thought. She nodded slightly before briefly rubbing her eyes tiredly with the tips of her fingers, looking back once more into the hallway. The hellhound shifts her position from leaning on the railing before nodding to herself again, turning back towards Jim with a thoughtful expression; "I'll think about it."

Jim nods, scratching his chin once again, sitting in silence for a moment before once more replying: "It's rare to have a dad that loves you as much as Blitz does, you're very lucky."

Loona nods, glancing back at Jim; "Yeah... yeah, I guess you're right."

The rest of the time on the porch was spent admiring the clear night sky, before the two of them said their 'goodnights' before heading off to bed. Jim sluggishly entered his bedroom, with Loona being the last one up. She hesitates just before she enters her room, briefly turning around to look into the living room where a sleeping Blitz was lying face-up on the couch. Loona smiles briefly, muttering under her breath; "Goodnight, dad," before she finally makes her way to bed.

Day 6 - At Long Last, Opening Up

Jim woke up the following morning, once again the first to do so. He makes his way into the living room, into the kitchen to the far end. He opens the fridge probably a little too loud for the time of the morning. He hears movement from behind him on the couch, hearing Blitz at long last wake up with a groan. The imp sluggishly wakes up, still lying down, placing his hands on his head; "Fuuuuuck..."

"You alright there, matey?" Jim asks, eating a bit of fruit he found.

"Ohh-, yeah, yeah... just *s-shwell*," Blitz groggily replies, a headache overpowering him; "Fuck me, it feels like the room is spinning...!"

Jim shrugs: "Oh well, serve you right for drinking that bloody cocktail you made with my expensive grog, hey?"

"How about fuck you~??" Blitz remarked back, smirking through his jagged, horrid teeth in spite of his searing migraine.

Jim brings him a tall glass of water; "Drink this instead and shut up, how about that?"

Blitz slowly gets up, grabbing the glass and drinking it slowly. Jim, meanwhile, brings his half-eaten breakfast to his lounge chair, facing the couch this time. He properly examines the odd specimen groggily slurring on the couch; his skin is scarlet, patched with white, small spikes protruding from his arms. In short, the specimen on his couch was a mess of black, red, and white.

"You know, mate, you truly are an ugly motherfucker," Jim remarks bluntly, shaking his head at the fact that this thing actually existed and was, to his "luck", crashed on his couch with what the owner of the aforementioned couch could imagine was a hangover never matched by anyone else.

"Yeah, and you're- you're a... fucking- fuck-head-looking fucker," Blitz slurred heavily, before placing his head back onto the couch.

Jim shakes his head once more, looking outside at the sun rising. The moderate heat of the environment around them translated into a light fog in the tree line. If he didn't have to watch what this drunken bastard on the couch was about to do in his home, he'd have gone out to walk amongst it.

"Well, look, to be completely honest with you, mate, I don't think you're in any state to go pig shooting today, OR to go home. I think I recall both your daughter and I telling you very explicitly to not drink it," Jim recalled, before being rudely interrupted with hand waving and very unintelligible slurring before the specimen turned around on the couch and briefly fell back asleep.

A silhouette emerges from the hallway, into the living room. Loona looks over the couch to find Blitz still unbelievably hung over, curled in the couch in a pitiful yet hilarious position. She smirks, shaking her head, before making her way to the kitchen to fetch herself something to eat.

"How long do you reckon he'll be this way before, you know, he snaps out of it," Jim asks the 'hound, a little frustrated about having to deal with this.

Loona shrugs, chewing a few slices of ham she found, leaning over the kitchen bench; "I don't know... I say give it a few hours. He does stupid shit like this, but he gets over it soon enough."

Jim sighs, giving his house guest the benefit of the doubt. A short minute or so later, at long last, Blitz gets up from his drunken state and sits upright, trying to regain focus of his surroundings. He clammers over to the kitchen sink, splashing his face with water, blinking a couple of times, before gaining some resemblance of functionality by demanding to Jim that they go shooting right at that instant. Jim didn't take this seriously, and nor did Loona, a bystander in the conversation, who was asked numerous times by her parental figure to 'back him up' on the claim that 'he was fine'.

"Okay, look," Jim capitulated; "If you want to go hunting, you're going to have to get rid of that migraine, alright? We can do it later this morning, on the condition that anything that just so happens to happen to you is in no way my fault, and that I've got a witness over here to back me up."

Blitz nods, still trying to focus himself with a little bit more success; "You got a deal, funny man. As long as I can stand, I-I can shoot... stuff."

Jim gestures his hand to say "whatever" before heading off to get himself ready, leaving Loona with the full responsibility of looking out for the overconfident dunderhead; "I'll be in the bathroom if

you need anything."

After a quick shave and an application of deodorant, he heads for the Ute to make sure everything was in order, only to discover his previously drunken 'friend' waiting outside, his respective firearm in his hands with an overconfident smirk on his face, surprisingly appearing to be in much better condition than he was minutes before.

"See," the imp called out, "What did I tell you? I'm fine!"

"You better fucken well be, or otherwise we're going to have to haul your arse back to a morgue if something happens to you," Jim retorted.

"Oh, you won't need to haul my ass anywhere, big man! If anyone's going to need their ass hauled, it's going to be me hauling yours," the overconfident little shit swiped back.

"That's what she said," Loona called out, emerging from the house and out towards the Ute.

Jim shakes his head, saying nothing, as he holsters his rifle behind the driver's seat and gets in. Soon enough, they were back on the open road, this time to a more deserted spot more in the westerly direction. After a good near twenty minutes of driving, Jim pulled his Ute off to the side of a river, surrounded by dense bushland. The tyres slipped briefly before stopping on the slightly muddy gravel bank of the river in question.

Jim retrieves his rifle, loading a full clip of rounds into it, and directing Blitz to 'get his arse out of the back' and follow him. Loona, who didn't particularly feel like doing much, hesitantly followed the pair across the timber bridge over the riverbank and towards a large open plain on the other side behind a thin line of trees. After crossing the bridge, the hound decided 'fuck it' and did her own scouting a few meters away. Jim, meanwhile, held out a pair of binoculars he had up to his eyes, slowly scanning the magnified distance.

Blitz tried to meet Jim's general line of sight, peering over; "Where the fuck are you looking at?"

"Searching," Jim simply replied.

After a brief scan of the horizon, Jim lowered the binoculars and huffed; "I swear I saw a big fuck-off group of them last week in this general area. Bloody hell, Roy, you told me this morning they were up here," he muttered to himself.

"Hey! They're over here," Loona bellowed from twenty or so meters away, on the opposite side of the bank.

Jim turned his head towards the other side, confirming Loona's claim; further down the river, about a hundred meters or more, was a small group of masses shifting near the water. Jim counted a good six to seven of them.

Jim tapped the imp's shoulder to the left of him, who was hyper-fixating on the horizon that he had already scanned with no luck; "Over this way, matey."

The pair of them sprinted over back across the bridge, to Loona's location, who was steadily tracking the boar's movements. Jim got into position, peering over, before being interrupted briefly by Loona; "Is it just me, or is there a massive one just over there? I swear, he's fucking huge!"

Jim peered over, using his binoculars, once again confirming the hellhound's suspicions; "So there is... shit, he must be a good five feet tall, and maybe... four feet long..."

"I reckon that could be yours, Loons," Blitz suggested, positioned behind a large rock nearby.

"What? Fuck no, I'm not going after that thing. The whole point of why we're out here is to prove that you're such a great shot," Loona retorted, still fixated on the absolutely massive boar.

Blitz grunted; "Yeah, well... What do you reckon, boss-man? Are we going to go after him," Blitz asked the man to his left who was surveying the pack in the distance, before chambering a round in his rifle and locking it in place.

"Sure. But keep quiet about it; Usually, the big bastards are really fucking aggressive. They see you trying to kill them, they will come after you with no fear," Jim warned, beginning to make his way up the bank.

Blitz soon followed, with Loona meanwhile choosing to hold back and observe from the distance. The two hunters slowly make their way up, trying their best to be obscured by the surrounding foliage obscuring parts of the partially mud-ridden path. They got to a safe enough distance before positioning themselves to get a clear shot.

"Go on, then, tough guy," Jim encouraged Blitz, who was positioned in the clearest spot; "That big fucker is yours."

Blitz grins, giving Jim a confirmatory 'thumbs up', before eyeing down his big, fat target. Blitz's migraine, unfortunately, hadn't completely gone, preventing the imp from properly focusing his sights. Jim notices this, asking Blitz if he was sure he could do this, with the imp retorting with "yes, I can, don't you dare doubt me," before breathing steadily and pulling the trigger.

BANG!! CRACK!!

Unfortunately, the shot missed, sending the small pack of boars scurrying off in different directions up the bank and into the surrounding tree line.

Jim tries to watch out for the scattering boars, especially trying to track the huge one, fearing it would find out their location; "Didn't you tell me you were fine? What was that!"

"It was a fluke," Blitz retorted, frustrated with himself and Jim's doubts; "I'm going after that big one," Blitz announced, before stumbling off into the tree line after the huge boar!

"BLITZ! Oh, for fu- BLITZ! STOP, YOU IDIOT!!" Jim bellowed to no result.

Loona jogs up to Jim, trying to track the imp's location; "Where the fuck's he run off to?!"

"No idea! We got to follow him, quick!!" Jim ordered, running reluctantly after the overzealous imp in the bushland, calling out his name over and over with ever-growing frustration in his voice.

The pair of them ran off deeper and deeper into the bushland, the deep foliage and trees frequently slowing them down as they heard Blitz running ever deeper. Loona grunts in frustration, her

athletic ability enabling her to maneuver through the scrub without much difficulty. The same, unfortunately, couldn't be said about Jim, who slogged behind, swearing on top of his tired lungs in frustration as he got snagged constantly in foliage. After much running, Loona was able to burst through the other side of the bushland, hitting another small clearing in the midst of the dense trees, finding Blitz desperately searching his surroundings for his victim.

"Blitz! W... argh-shit... wait up!" Loona wheezed, catching her breath, placing her hands on her knees after the effort of having to contend with the surrounding wilderness and its obstacles.

"Damn! He's gone, the fat fuck!" Blitz cursed, clenching his teeth in frustration, "I thought I had him!"

"Look, Blitz, he's gone! He's obviously too fast, just throw in the towel!" Loona tried to convince Blitz, hastily examining her surroundings for any potential threats.

"Fuck no!" Blitz stubbornly refuted; "I'm going to find that pig by the end of today so I can prove to that hillbilly cocksucker that I'm a great fucking shot! Ohoho- he'll be so fucking pissed when I finally... speaking of that guy, where is he?"

Loona looks back towards the direction to where she came from, furrowing her brow; "I... I don't know, he was right behind me... Jim! Hey! Are you out there!?"

There was no reply.

Just as Loona is about to turn back around to face Blitz, the sound of distant gunfire can be heard; two loud, thunderous shots, followed by yelling out from within the bush! The yelling and gunshots echo throughout the trees, and it was pretty obvious after a short while of who it exactly was.

"SHIT," Loona simply exclaims, sprinting back to the path which she cleared, maneuvering once again through the dense bush!

The yelling got louder, the sounds getting clearer as the hellhound sprinted, before at last finding the shape of a huge, thick mass circling a very specific location in the pathway before her. Immediately she knew that it was Blitz's target, attacking Jim with a vengeance never before seen, lunging, and throwing its entire body weight against the man now trying his best to escape!

Loona eyes the target, quickly gaining momentum before tackling the huge boar with all of her bodyweight! She manages to shove it off Jim, sending it tumbling through the scrub, the behemoth squealing an abundance of awful ear-piercing shrieks and gurgles, being stunned by the sudden stabbing pain in its neck! Loona tears at the horrific boar's neck, desperately trying to disarm her target, before it manages to make her stumble by slipping out of her bite! With big, angry eyes, the boar glares at the hellhound, ready to make its move! Suddenly, a deafening gunshot rings out, the huge boar’s squealing and predatory grunting suddenly being silenced, as it slumps over with a heavy thump!

Loona shoots her head to the right, finding Blitz aiming his rifle where the huge son-of-a-bitch once stood. He approaches the corpse of the massive brute, aiming his rifle again at the beast's temple, pulling the trigger once more to make sure it was dead.

"DON'T fuck with my daughter, you big fat whore!" Blitz bellows, hitting it with the butt end of his firearm before Loona puts her hand on his shoulder:

"Woah, woah, Blitz! I'm okay, you've killed it," she reassured, dusting herself off from the dust and dirt.

A heaving breath could be heard from within the grass behind them, Loona turning around and gazing at the spot to find Jim lying face-up in the grass and dirt, trying to catch his breath. It was obvious that he had been dazed, as he was staring wide-eyed and unfocused up into the sky above them.

"H-...H-help... f-...fuck, he- agh... help," Jim spluttered, desperately trying to catch his breath, after having the wind practically knocked out of him.

"Oh, fuck no- Jim!" Loona exclaimed, quickly rushing to his side to help him back up.

The hellhound grabs Jim's left arm and rests it around her back to prop him up, dragging him over to rest him on the base of a huge gumtree. His gaze was still unfocused, trying desperately to catch his breath. He looks around, a look of terror plastered on his face.

Blitz runs over, waving his hand in front of Jim's terrified face; "Hey, big guy, you're safe now! It's dead, you can breathe! You're not dead just yet, don't panic."

"Like that's going to help," Loona responds to her dad's efforts, before looking directly into Jim's eyes, trying to calm him down and assess the situation, both hands on his shoulders; "Hey, dude! Look at me! It's okay, you can relax now, Blitz killed it! Jim, p-please, take some deep breaths!"

At last, Jim snaps out of his trance and begins breathing deeper and slower, regaining his wit, focusing his gaze on the hellhound. Dirt and dust stained his clothes and face, his shirt tattered with a few holes from the attack!

"Shit- urgh- shit, s-shit," Jim curses between breaths, looking into the hellhound's scarlet eyes, finally coming to his senses; "I... argh! I... thought I... I thought I was-"

"Doesn't matter what you thought, big guy, you're safe now," Blitz reassured, doing something useful by handing the beaten man his tin canister of water.

Jim grabs it, thanking the imp before desperately chugging the last drops of water, letting out a huge gasp afterwards before wiping his face from the dirt.

"Thank you... thank you," Jim spluttered, at long last breathing steadily, "H-help me up, please."

Both Loona and Blitz helped him up, raising Jim from under his arms, carefully helping the roughed-up hunter back up onto his feet. He regained his footing after a slight stumble and picked up his rifle and hat, once again using it as a makeshift crutch. Jim turns his attention to the now dead behemoth lying in the grass with a few huge bullet holes punctured into the side of its massive head. After a couple of seconds at examining the huge boar, he turns towards the pair behind him.

"You... *both of you*... you both saved my life- I don't... I don't know how to thank the both of you enough... f-fuck... fuck-I thought I was dead..." Jim choked, tears forming in his eyes; "I-I take back what I said to you, Blitz... you're a bloody good shot – a drunken idiot, but a bloody good shot..."

"No way in hell I was going to let THAT motherfucker harm my Loonie... or, come to think of it, you... I guess..." Blitz replied, grinning back at Jim in return, obviously proud of himself.

"You okay to walk back, or...?" Loona queried the bruised and battered "hillbilly".

Jim waved his hand, checking for any wounds that he could've possibly sustained; "Yeah, nah, I'll be okay, just... just a bit bruised and sore, is all. B-by the way, your fur's softer than I thought it was," he jokes briefly, still wheezing a bit from having the wind knocked out of him.

Loona rolls her eyes, replying with a simple "shut up" before looking back at the boar, in awe of just how big and girthy it was. Upon Blitz asking what exactly to do with the boar, Jim simply replied with "just leave it to rot, it's not worth it", before the three of them began to stumble their way back through the bush, heading back to the Ute parked by the riverbank. The sun hung over them, a pleasant warmth comforting the bruised Jim who upon getting back to his vehicle slumped into the driver's seat to rest for a while.

"You know what," Jim conceded, "How about we sit around here a while, that ok? I got to lick my wounds here anyhow."

The hellhound shrugged, looking at her surroundings; "Fine by me; I like it here anyway, it's cooler," she replied, approaching a nearby towering gumtree to sit under it. Blitz followed his daughter after checking on Jim's current condition in a rare sign of 'caring' for his "rival", opting to sit down near the hellhound who took another brief selfie of herself. The imp lies down in the dirt with his hands behind his head, closing his eyes and admiring the warmth. He was just about to doze off before a voice interrupted him.

"H-hey, uh, Blitz?"

The imp looked up, the voice coming from the hellhound to the right of him. He turns his head, his attention towards her; "Yes, Loons? What's up?"

The hellhound looks down and to the side briefly, appearing to be deep in thought. She sighs, before looking back up at her adoptive father; "I don't say this much, but... thank you, I guess... for everything you've done for me as my dad."

Blitz couldn't believe what he was hearing. He stutters, sitting upright, his attention now fully onto the pensive hellhound next to him; "L-Loonie, I don't... where's this coming from?"

Loona sighs, looking towards the distance at nothing in particular; "I don't know, I just... I just know that I often don't show that I'm grateful that you, well, took me in, especially with all the shit

that I give you and the others. You haven't been perfect, but you're trying. I know I'm moody, abrupt, an asshole and whatever, and that's probably just me, but I just want you to know... I appreciate everything you've done for me," she concedes, a brief smile appearing on her face.

This little speech was met with a sudden hug, jolting Loona from her gaze into the distance. She looks down, finding the imp holding onto her, his arms wrapped around before conveying something simple in reply; "Don't worry, I know you appreciate it."

Loona was stunned, but instead of usually shooing Blitz away or plying him off, she embraced him back, smiling gently. This moment of embrace lasted for around ten or so seconds until it was Blitz's turn to pipe up this time. He lets go of his embrace, his eyes shifting before beginning to speak.

"Loonie, I... I'd like to say something as well," the imp began, sounding thoughtful.

The hellhound nods, signaling that she was listening.

Blitz continued; "Look... I know I haven't been a great dad to you, and... and I understand that we don't always see eye to eye. When I was trying to find a way to come get you, I had some time alone to reflect because I legitimately didn't think I... I would ever see you again."

Blitz choked up a little, before continuing:

"I'm supposed to relate to you, to at least understand on a basic level how you feel about certain things. I know I sometimes force you into stuff and can also be very over-protective, I recognise this now. I know it's wrong, a-and I'm sorry... I'm so sorry for not being a… a better father," Blitz choked once again, no longer able to say much more.

Loona was taken aback, surprised at these admissions. She leans in, embracing Blitz once again, who was taken aback by this gesture from the hellhound that would before be deemed impossible. She holds this embrace before speaking, albeit quiet:

"Thanks for finally understanding," Loona replies, before adding; “You’re a great dad, Blitz, you really are. Compared to everyone else, you’re the best person I know… Oh, and I guess I apologize for kneeing you in the balls a week or so ago. Thinking about it, I don't think you deserved that."

This moment of familial affection was interrupted by an outside voice in the Ute:

"Well, would you look at that," Jim interjected, grinning as he limped, leaning on the side of his Ute, almost falling over.

Loona grunted, rolling her eyes; "Yeah, yeah, I know, big surprise, we're making up – also, dude, you are NOT in any position to drive!"

Jim tried to play it off, standing up on both his legs before swaying a bit and just about to fall over before catching himself. Jim concedes, throwing his free hand in the air shaking his head; "Well, shit, I'm the only one who can drive, unless either of you want to have a crack at it! Can either of you drive a manual?"

Blitz interjects, verbally confirming that he could. Jim nods in return, getting into the back of the Ute this time, allowing Loona to return to her accustomed passenger's side once again.

"Ready when you two are done consoling each other," Jim announced half joking, wincing in pain from his bruising.

Blitz was the one to lead the way, taking the keys off of the wounded ex-driver and getting in, followed by the hellhound shortly after. With a bit of a struggle with getting used to the feel of the car in question, with Jim pounding on the roof to the imp to "take it easy" and "for fuck sakes, be gentle with it or I'll throttle you", Blitz managed to drive the three of them back home and surprisingly in one piece.

Jim limps his way back onto the porch, stumbling into the lounge chair outside, inviting the other two to 'help themselves' with anything in the fridge or pantry, which Blitz much appreciated. Loona, meanwhile, sat with Jim for a short minute or so, taking a picture of the wounded hunter with his permission, smiling as much as he could in his current condition. After checking absolutely once more with the man that he was absolutely sure he was okay and didn't need anything, the hellhound also went inside, leaving the door open.

Jim, meanwhile, closed his eyes before taking a nap, being careful not to move around too much. After a short while of getting comfortable and making sure once more that he had not broken any bones, he at long last drifted off to sleep.

...

"Jim. Dude, you there? Hello?"

Jim wakes up from his sleep, grunting and opening his eyes, to be met with Loona towering over him, holding something in her hands.

"Hm? What- what's up," Jim at last replied, blinking a few times, and rubbing his eyes a bit.

"Got a letter here for you. Found it slipped under the door, I only just discovered it," Loona informed him, handing him the letter.

Jim examined it, thanking Loona, who responded with a "all good" before heading back inside, back to Blitz who by the sounds of things was on the phone to someone. Jim couldn't be bothered with the imp at the moment, instead focusing on the contents of the letter. He rips it open, flipping the folded paper open. He reads it carefully, examining every word.

"...No... no way... no, no this isn't... oh shit..." Jim whispered to himself, dumbfounded by the contents of the letter. He puts the letter in his lap and puts his hands on the sides of his head.

"And no mineral water, you know I hate it! I'm just going outside," Loona called from inside, now at the front door, turning towards Jim; "So, Jim who-"

Loona notices Jim bent over, staring down at the letter, whispering to himself. She grows aware of his current state, lowering her tone before continuing; "Dude, what's up? Who is it?"

Jim leans back on his chair, looking up briefly with an astounded and thoughtful expression, before turning to look at Loona; "It's my brother. He's coming back," he says, half smiling.

Loona becomes confused yet intrigued; "You got a brother? Well... congrats, I guess? Why, what's up, is that a good thing?"

Jim stutters before continuing; "We haven't seen Paul since four years ago when he left. We thought he was dead. But this is him- this is... this is his fucking handwriting, and his signature, and..."

Loona tries to comprehend this very sudden and unexpected information, observing Jim as he sits upright trying to figure out whether or not this was some sick joke. He looks to Loona, lost for words, his eyes narrowed in disbelief before getting up from his seat despite his bruising around his lower torso and upper left leg. He slowly walks over to the railings, looking towards the steel and corrugated iron shed adjacent to his house:

"That garage there, Paul helped me build it when I first moved in. He- he gave me a loan of about five thousand dollars to construct it. Concreting, drilling, delivery of the materials; that was all him," Jim explained solemnly; "T-then one day, four years ago, he just left. My old man told me that he just left his things and went... somewhere, we didn't know."

Jim wanted to continue, but hesitated, looking back towards Loona. He was about to try once again to say something more before he gave up, looking away. Loona leaned on the space next to him, looking in the same direction, also not sure of what to say.

"I wish I had siblings," the hellhound finally said, a blank thoughtful stare on her face; "At least a brother, or a sister. Well, as I told you a night or so ago, I somewhat got Octavia, though I don't know her too well yet, but I mean blood relatives. Take it from me, you're very lucky to have one."

Jim nods, wiping his face from the last specks of dirt left. He turns to Loona briefly, wanting to say something, but chooses not to, opting instead to give her a small smile, still not entirely sure of what to say. The temporary silence was suddenly cut short when the door swung open, revealing a frustrated imp staring down at his phone:

"Dammit! They hung up on me, the whores," Blitz exclaimed, putting it away in his pocket with an inconvenienced grunt; "Well, shit, looks like we're heading into town for the night."

"Not looking like that, you're not," Jim retorted, scoffing at the imp's foolishness; "You're going to give people bloody heart attacks looking like that, you almost gave me one when I first saw your mug in person! Why'd they hang up on you, anyway, who was it?"

"Oh, just some takeaway place in town, I probably got annoyed at them for talking over me, but that's beside the point. No offense, Jim-boy, but your taste is garbage," Blitz explained, gesturing down the hall towards the general area of the kitchen.

"Well, I'm sorry, matey, but that's what I have," Jim replied, shrugging his shoulders slightly; "You two can head into town, I don't feel like it tonight. You're going to have to walk there though, I'll probably pick you both up later in the evening."

"What are you going to do, then," Loona inquired, "Will you be okay here?"

Jim laughed, shaking his head; "Loona, I've been living here alone for four years since I was eighteen, I reckon I'll manage."

Loona smirks, replying with a simple "whatever you say, smartass" before heading back to her room to change to her human guise and to get herself ready in general. Blitz vanished back into the house as well, leaving Jim outside for a short while, returning back to his chair to sleep. He didn't snooze long before being met with a new face; it was Blitz, albeit now human, wearing his usual attire and swept-back hair.

"What do you think, tough guy, how do I look," Blitz boasted, not necessarily seeking Jim's approval – not that he would anyhow.

"Stupid. You're not wearing that in town, they'll look at you funny," Jim scoffed; "Take my coat hanging on the coat rack there, I'm sure it'll fit you. It's not a warm jacket either, so you'll be able to wear it in this weather without heating up."

"What, this old thing?" Blitz questioned, bringing out the long black coat and examining it, throwing it over his shoulders and wearing it like an old cape.

"Yup, that's it... and you know what? It doesn't look half bad on you, hey?" Jim admitted, examining the "human" in front of him.

"Well, shit, two compliments in one day," Blitz retorted, becoming smug, "I knew you'd grow to like me!"

Jim grunts, waving his hand away; "That's a stretch and a half."

Coming out onto the deck interrupting the back-and-forth was Loona, opening the door to reveal herself once again in her human guise, wearing her usual clothing but this time with a black jacket she had bought a few days prior, suitable for the warmer yet moderate temperature outside.

"Right, so you ready yet, Blitz, or you going to keep bickering out here all night," Loona interrupted, shifting her jacket to fit comfortably.

Blitz fixed himself up, styling his newly acquired hair briefly before pointing finger-guns at Jim; "See you around, Jim-boy," he remarked, before being nudged on by Loona.

The two "humans" set off down the path, leaving Jim in his thoughts. As he watched them walk up the road back off his property and towards town, he looked back down at the letter, once again drifting off into thoughts of nostalgia. Was it really his brother, Paul? Only time would tell.

Later that evening, Loona and Blitz finally made it into town. Blitz had money of dubious origin to spend and opted to purchase a few articles of clothing and shortly after made a direct beeline to the nearest bar. Loona took her time instead, following further behind, taking in the cosy town atmosphere. Sure, the town was busy, but it was largely peaceful, which couldn't be said the same about her true home half the time. After a while, she followed Blitz into the bar he had entered, trying to find him in the crowd. She got a few looks here and there, some merely curious and some downright perverted, as she made her way down to the bar front, finding Blitz giving the barman hell to say the least.

"I'm sorry, mate," the middle-aged Barman with a slight beer gut and the fuzziest gray sideburns Loona had ever seen explained to Blitz, "But I just can't serve you something that strong. It'll kill you, guaranteed!"

"Okay, okay, I get it, sheesh!" Blitz at last capitulated; "Do you have anything else with a little bit of buzz?"

"Pint of 'Fireball' Premium Brandy; that's probably the strongest I got at the moment, which is at least legal and not literal pure turpentine," the barman emphasised.

Blitz threw a five-dollar bill onto the counter; "Two of them!"

The barman collected the bill, getting to work. Blitz meanwhile turned his attention to the newly arrived Loona, pulling up a barstool for her.

"Still giving people absolute hell, huh," Loona queried, shaking her head and smiling, finding his antics somewhat amusing instead of annoying this time.

"Hey, the customer is always right, isn't he," Blitz replied, watching the barman closely, "What's the point of going to a bar and not getting the strongest poison?"

"Oh, I dunno, probably so you don't literally die," Loona scoffed; "Maybe the bartender over here doesn't want to be responsible for your death? Hell, maybe I don't want you to die."

"Oh, come on, Loonie! It's a Friday night," Blitz chortled, "Have a bit of fun!"

Loona huffs, smiling at her parental figure; "You're insane, you know that?"

Blitz smugly smiles back; "Tell me something I don't know," he replies with his usual snarky attitude before he was interrupted by the bartender who handed the "human" his two glasses before going off and serving adjacent customers of various states of sobriety.

"Here you go, Loonie; On me," Blitz smiles, sliding his daughter one of the glasses which she catches and expresses her "thanks" before downing a few swallows of the beverage. Blitz, meanwhile, opted at attempting to scull his serving, which ended just as well as Loona expected. This time, instead of getting annoyed at his mischief, Loona found herself somewhat laid back; perhaps Jim's advice earlier on about opening up to her "old man" did benefit her.

The rest of the hour they stayed at the hotel was spent much the same, Blitz ordering another pint of Brandy, though the barman forced him to downgrade to a schooner which he begrudgingly accepted. Loona opted to hold back on the alcohol for a change, somehow knowing she'd have to escort her dad back to Jim's for another alcohol-induced crash. After a bit more drinking and perhaps privately making fun of the group of morons out the front of the bar having a fight over literally nothing, Loona along with her surprisingly sober and functional dad, began the walk back home. On the way back, both Blitz and Loona changed back to their imp and hellhound forms respectively under the cover of darkness as they took the shortcut they took with Jim the day before.

"Fuck, I hope this is the way back," Loona comments as she shines her phone's light in front of them, allowing for navigation through the night to be that much easier.

"Sure it is! I'd recognize that tree from miles away," Blitz happily replies as he walks side-by-side with Loona, following the pathway which was surrounded by a thick covering of shrubbery and trees.

"W-what? Which tree? There's literally hundreds of them around us right now," Loona asks with confusion, growing suspicious that perhaps Blitz had become tipsy from his alcoholic binge.

"That one in front of us! T-the one that's got all the leaves and shit," Blitz points in front of him in an unfocused manner, confirming Loona's previous suspicion; it was probably for the best that she did hold back on the drinking that night.

"Hah- alright, if you say so," Loona plays along as they continue up the pathway, her phone's light illuminating the way before them. As the silence filled the ambiance around them while they strolled along, the hellhound decided to break it; something was beginning to plague her mind which had been brewing since she got herself stuck in this strange land; "Look, Blitz, can I, uh... can I ask you something?"

"Of course, sweetie. What is it," Blitz slurs his words a little as he turns his attention to Loona, a curious and attentive look in his slightly-illuminated eyes despite his presumably drunken state.

Loona hesitates for a moment, debating on whether or not she should say anything more before abruptly sighing, ultimately decided to go for it; "... I know it sounds fucking stupid for me to ask, it's probably obvious, but... why did you come back for me?"

"Because you're my daughter, Loonie. It's not like I'm going to leave you out here to the mercy of whatever drunken, illiterate hick happened to find you - I mean, Jim-boy is already a hick, but he's not drunken or illiterate from what I can tell," Blitz explains as they both continue to trudge through the pathway, beginning to wind up towards a slight incline in the clearing before them.

Loona's eyes shift a little bit as she furrowed her brow in genuine confusion; "Even... even after all that I've done?"

"Wh-what do you mean, sweetie?"

Loona grunts in an incredulous fashion; "Fucking- what do you mean "what do I mean"? The shit that I've thrown your way, the way that I'm an asshole to basically everyone around me, how I'm... I mean- fuck ... how I'm so ungrateful that you've put up with me. I know we talked about this earlier today, and we hugged it out and all that sweet shit, but I just don't understand how you've put up with me after all this time. Why didn't you just leave me out here when you CLEARLY had the chance? It would've been so much peaceful without me in your life."

Blitz's expression becomes one of genuine feeling; "...Because I love you—"

"But why??" Loona interrupts a little, genuinely confused at this point; "Why do you love me? Why do I deserve it? Haven't I... haven't I hurt you?"

Blitz becomes serious as he gazes into Loona's eyes, continuing to walk alongside her; "... It's because you've made me happy, sweetie. You've filled a family-shaped void in my life that nobody else could, and for that, I'll forever be glad that I found you when I did. I was at a loss of where to go with my miserable existence, and when I found you? That loss of direction went away. As much as I hate to admit it, sweetie, sometimes... sometimes your attitude and your words do hurt, but when I decided to adopt you, I knew that one way or another I would have to come across the challenges of looking after someone. I love you for who you are, Loonie. You're not just "some hellhound" or "some bitch" as I've heard some describe you as... you're my daughter. You deserve love because you are somebody, okay? You're somebody that needs someone to be there for them, like everyone else does."

Loona was unsure of what to say to this. It all felt so surreal that this imp- no, not just "this imp"; Blitz, her adoptive dad, would come back for her despite it all. She sighs as she says one final thing; "I don't think I'll ever get you, but... but thank you."

"I'm confusing, I know!" Blitz chuckles as they continue up the pathway, the remainder of the walk being spent in silence which allowed Loona to think about what Blitz had just explained to her. Despite it being dark and near pitch black, they were able to navigate their way back for a good twenty minutes, trudging up the hill and through the front door of Jim's home, now pretty much a glorified hotel.

"Hey, we're back!" Loona calls out, notifying the homeowner who was slumped on the couch, looking at nothing in particular.

"Wha- Oh, it's you two," Jim replies, getting up from his seat; "Well, well, look who's sober! Surprised you haven't blacked out drunk, Blitz!"

"Oh, blow me," Blitz replied, ready to head to "bed" in his accustomed couch.

"What've you been doing here all alone," Loona asked, intending for some common courtesy towards Jim.

"I've been thinking, that's what I've been doing," Jim replies, stretching his arms and grunting; "What else can I do?"

"Don't think too hard," Loona responds, slipping her jacket off and hanging it off the coat rack in the living room.

Upon Jim heaving himself off the couch with a grunt, Blitz opts to immediately crash on it, making himself comfortable and using Jim's old jacket as a makeshift sheet. Jim gave up, telling Blitz that he could keep it, noting that he needed a new one anyways. Blitz shortly after falls dead asleep, Jim opting to head to bed himself, but not before Loona quietly calls Jim's name, wanting to tell him something.

"Look, dude..." she began, taking off her own coat from the rack and folding it around her arm carefully; "...Thanks for giving me that advice, about opening up to dad earlier today. You're right, it has helped. I was properly able to, you know, hang around with him, and talk. Even made fun of some braindead dipshits fighting in the bar tonight with him."

Jim smiled; "Well, hey, I'm glad I could help. As I said, you know; spend every moment you can with him."

Loona nodded, rubbing her eyes with the tips of her fingers, feeling herself become drowsy; "I will. Thank you, Jim," she drowsily states before heading to her room to crash.

Jim nods, smiling to himself, before he himself makes his way back to his bed, Blitz's snoring slightly irritating both man and hellhound, but hey; what could they do?

...

Jim woke up suddenly, a foreign and uninviting sound jolting him out from his sleep! After waking up for a few seconds, he at last focuses. He checks the digital clock next to him: 2:30AM, it reads. Jim sits upright, the sound still emanating from somewhere within the house. He listens carefully, continuing to hear it, before at last recognising what it was; someone or something was growling repeatedly.

Jim shoots up, pretty sure on who it could be. He stumbles out of bed and into the hallway, staring at the door adjacent to his room, confirming that the growling was coming from Loona's room.

"What the fuck," Jim whispers to himself.

He is suddenly startled by Blitz who snuck up on him from the living room, his eyes slightly illuminated in the dark.

"What's going on," Blitz asks, concerned.

"I don't know," Jim whispers, before they both jump, suddenly hearing the hellhound let out the loudest yell of genuine fear followed by defensive yelping! The sound of the bed shifting with force emanated from inside the room before a loud and sudden “Thud!” reverberated from within, perhaps signalling that Loona had suddenly fallen to the floor! They both hear her from within the room desperately pleading to someone or something!

"NO! FUCK, PLEASE! D-Don't make me go back there! Please don't! I promise I’ll be good!"

Blitz was the first to react, suddenly swinging the door open to reveal Loona who was cowering in the corner, her back pressed up against the wall, a genuine look of terror plastered on her face. The hellhound was dazed and confused, trying her absolute seemingly desperate best to cower away, continuing to beg pitifully to whatever was frightening her so badly before her eyes shift towards Blitz standing in the doorway.

"L-Loonie..." Blitz simply spoke, practically overwhelmed with a paternal feeling of concern for his daughter.

Loona stares at the short silhouette that was standing within the doorway, her vision still unfocused until at last finally focusing, realising that it was Blitz. She stutters pitifully, at long last calming down enough through deep and heavy breaths so that she could form a coherent sentence after her sudden wave of fear, though she still cowered in the corner; "Blitz, I... I don't... Don't send me back there," she pleas, her voice cracking.

Almost immediately, Blitz knew exactly what she was talking about. His heart sinks, lost on what to say; It hurt him to see his own daughter, his family, his Loona, cower away from him and beg for mercy in such a manner - it felt so terribly wrong; “I… I…”

“Please, I.. I know I’m an absolute bitch a-and I’m ungrateful, but please… d-dad… don’t send me back. I… I’ll be better, I promise… I don’t want to go…,” Loona hopelessly continues to plead, her usual rough and mean facade completely gone.

Blitz feels himself almost tear up hearing his own daughter plead like this to him. Never once before had Loona ever looked and sounded so desperate, terrified and alone. For whatever reason, he turns his head towards Jim who was standing in the hallway only for the young man to stare back, a look of worry and confusion on the homeowner’s face. Blitz turns back around, deciding after much thinking to slowly approach the cowering hellhound; it was his absolute duty to be there for his own daughter, after all. Loona hesitates, attempting to retreat more before she realized at long last that she is safe, allowing for Blitz to come forward.

To help with calming the still sheepish Loona down, Blitz decides to sit down in front of Loona, concern still very much expressed deep in his eyes; by this point, the imp was very much in full dad mode. He places his hand on Loona's shoulder, trying to mouth something off before speaking; "Loonie… you know I’d never let you go. You’re safe with me. You’re safe."

Loona freezes for a moment, calming herself down with her dad’s genuine and heartfelt support at last. She stares into Blitz's eyes, trying to hold her composure after her sudden night terror. She felt so vulnerable and weak, unable to defend herself, needing Blitz's support for something so fucking stupid. This effort to compose herself was futile as Loona all of a sudden fell into a state she tried so hard to avoid:

She broke down.

Not growing pensive or becoming tearful with a light whimper - a complete and utter breakdown.

Without much of a warning, Loona began to weep. It started off as short suppressed heaves, before it turned into full-on heavy fear-induced sobbing, suddenly holding onto Blitz in a massive embrace, burying her face into his chest, no longer able to keep her already waning composure.

Loona whispers through her uncontrolled sobs over and over, trying to catch her breath; "I'm sorry! *Hic! Hic!* I'm— I'm so sorry… *Hic! Hic!* I'm— *Hic! — s*-sorry..."

Blitz, meanwhile, rubs her back, feeling himself getting emotional. He says nothing, allowing his adoptive daughter to open up completely with no disruption. This lasted for a whole minute, the hellhound weeping over and over, until she finally managed to calm down, lifting her head up from Blitz's chest, looking into his gaze through misty eyes.

"Loons, you know I'd never let you go. I know I can be an asshole myself, but never to you. It's only a dream, it's not reality," Blitz reassures, holding her shoulders with both hands.

Loona nods softly, her cheeks wet with tears, as she wipes them with her palms. She looks back up after wiping them away from her eyes, softly smiling: "I know... I- I know. Ugh, shit, I'm dumb."

Blitz points his finger at her, albeit with no maliciousness; "Hey, I don't want to hear anyone talk about my Loonie that way, yeah? That includes you."

Loona nods, chuckling softly as she composed herself at last, her eyes still slightly sore and wet with tears. Blitz helps her up, taking her hand and pulling her back up onto her feet after checking if she was okay to do so.

"What do you want to do now? Want me to stay here with you," Blitz asks in a rare show of offering an option for privacy.

Loona thinks about her options, hesitating before she finally answers; "C-can I sit with you for a while?"

Blitz nods before leading her back on to her bed, the pair of them sitting in silence, looking outside into the night sky which was remarkably clear in their slightly remote location, away from artificial light sources.

"Hey, where'd that big moron go," Blitz asks, looking back outside in the hallway, before he calls out; "Hey, moron! Are you out there?"

"I'm on the veranda, mate," Jim calls back; "Stay with your daughter for a while."

"Don't tell me what to do," Blitz remarks back, before continuing to stay with Loona.

"And what do you do? You stay with me. So much for big, independent Blitz." Loona replies, managing to half-smile after her breakdown, some tears still staining her face.

"I'm here by choice," Blitz refutes with a smirk as he gazes out with the hellhound into what was perhaps the most mesmerizing night sky he had ever seen.

The two of them stared out up into the "abyss" for a solid ten minutes, being lost in the moment. It was shared opinion between the both of them that, in the five or so years that they had known each other, this was perhaps the closest that they had ever been, remarkably yet unsurprisingly. In addition, it was Loona's own personal observation that she seemed to enjoy this closeness, something she never thought she would find even remotely satisfying.

After a while, Loona informed the imp next to her that she would be returning to sleep, with Blitz obliging, before getting up and closing the door behind him, leaving Loona to her privacy, but not before he checked with her that she was "absolutely sure" that she was alright. After closing the door behind him, Blitz sighs and heads back to the couch to crash once more. Jim, meanwhile, chose to stay out on the porch, finding himself dozing off in the lounge chair, aware of the seemingly once-in-a-lifetime camaraderie that had just occurred in that room that early morning.

Day 7 - Departing For Home

Jim wakes up groggily at around seven in the morning, the first thing he sees as he opens his eyes is the remarkable pink-hue that glowed with the sun. This morning view was perhaps one of the many benefits of living out on this property; the ability to wake up to something so peaceful, the tranquil colors of the horizon able to make anyone just live in the moment. After waking up a little bit more, Jim gets up, the bruising in his lower torso and upper legs from the day before no longer rendering him slightly pained when he moved though thankfully not as painful as the day before. He trudges back inside to find Blitz outside Loona's door, leaning against the adjacent wall with one arm wrapped around his body and a pensive look on his, admittedly still ugly, face. He nods to Jim, to which the homeowner nods back.

"How's she going," Jim asks with a brief yawn and a stretch.

"Still asleep," Blitz quietly replies, sipping some coffee he had brewed for himself.

"No more of those night terrors," Jim asks out of courtesy.

"No, thankfully," Blitz solemnly replies, looking back towards the spare bedroom's door with a sigh.

"Righto. ... If you don't mind me being curious, what was she saying? Something about 'sending her back'," Jim asks with a slightly raised brow, though he knew that it obviously had something to do with her adoption.

Blitz shoots Jim a hesitant glare, knowing that he shouldn't say or assume too much about Loona's experiences in that pit that was the 'hellhound adoption center'; it was one of those topics which held a lot of emotional weight for both himself and his daughter. A rather intrusive thought invited itself into his head; a part of him felt guilty that perhaps, at first, he adopted Loona for his own personal gain, as a mere prop or a tool for his rather charismatic business goals. This made the imp nearly tear up with a deep feeling of guilt, the mere thought that this may have been the case being too much for him. After a moment of regaining his composure, Blitz finally gave an answer; "It's some heavy shit, big guy, I... I don't think we want to talk about it."

"Nah, I get what you mean," Jim accepts as he rubs his sore upper leg, looking into the adjacent living room as he did so. From the hallway, Jim could see that there was a second cup of coffee

sitting on the kitchen bench, still hot and steaming away.

"Who's that for," Jim asks, pointing towards it.

"Oh, that? For my Loons. You go make your own," Blitz smirks, patting Jim on the back from his shorter stature, before Jim shoots him a look that said "don't touch me again".

"How thoughtful, mate," Jim half jokes before getting his rifle out of the cabinet and inspecting it out of boredom, leaning on the wall across from Blitz. Jim quickly dips into his room, throwing on his red button-up shirt, dark-gray trousers and a pair of black socks before coming back out and returning to his side of the hallway, once again inspecting his rifle carefully from front to back. As he leans back up against his respective side of the hallway, both Jim and Blitz hear Loona begin to wake up from within the room, the hellhound from within her room letting out an audible huff as she cracks her knuckles audibly.

This sound of movement from within her daughter's room prompts Blitz to speak up, carefully approaching the door and giving a brief knock; "You okay in there, sweetie?"

"Nnngh.. y-yeah I'm okay, Blitz, just give me a few minutes to wake up, okay," Loona calls out with a groggy tone to her voice from behind the closed door.

Blitz, being the protective father that he was towards his 'Loonie', asked again; "You sure? I can get you something if you'd like."

Loona sighs from within her room as the sound of the bed shifting from inside is heard, signalling that Loona had finally gotten out of bed; "I'm sure. Could you please let me wake up? I can't think straight yet."

"A-are you su-"

"Oh for fu- Yes, Blitz, I'm completely sure. I'm fine, okay? Don't panic, I'll come out soon," Loona interrupts her dad's repetitive questioning after quickly growing frustrated with it, though she knew that he only meant it for the best.

Finally to Blitz's relief, Loona comes out of her room in her usual attire, ruffling her hair and patting down her fur a bit to make it somewhat presentable. She is met with the human and the imp standing at either side of the hallway, saying to both of them collectively a "morning" before heading into the living room, stopping as she notices the cup of coffee practically waiting for her from on top of the kitchen bench.

"Who- who's that for," Loona asks, spinning around for a moment.

"It's not mine," Jim replies, "your old man over here has made it for you."

Loona blinks, looking towards Blitz surprised before giving him a small smile; she wasn't used to this amount of generosity; "O-oh... thanks, dad," she lets slip, suddenly realizing what she had just called the imp.

Jim gives off a small smirk in the background whilst Blitz is left pleasantly dumbfounded, his eyes quickly dilating and a cheerful smile suddenly stretching on his dumb-looking expression. Never before in such a casual situation had Loona ever called her adoptive dad, well, "dad" directly to his face and so openly like this. Everything that Blitz had done for Loona had led up to this little moment, and at last that wonderful moment had come.

The hellhound clears her throat before pointing to both the human and the imp in the hallway; "Don't you dare tell anyone else that I call you that," she instructs Blitz, slightly embarrassed.

Blitz chuckles, assuring that he wouldn't, which would probably later on prove to be a lie. Jim, meanwhile, puts his rifle away before walking past Blitz, into the living room and looking outside through the windows, admiring the view of the morning sunrise reflecting through his little abode.

The phone ringing in Blitz's pocket startles Jim out of his gaze, turning around to see the imp fumble the phone out of his pocket and answer it:

"Moxxie! Are they gone? ... oh thank fuck! ... yeah, we're just squatting over at some idiot's house. ... yes, the same one. ... Yeah, I found her. ... No, no, I was wrong, she's completely fine! Where are you now? ... Okay, we'll meet back in the next twenty-four. ... Okay, just dandy, I'll see you back at the office."

"I take it that's one of the others, is it," Jim asks Loona adjacent to him.

"Yup, that would be him," Loona responds, sipping her coffee; "He's that little one with the white hair I showed you a couple days ago."

Blitz scoffs, butting in as usual; "Hah! Little? He's too much of a fat motherfucker to be little!"

"Fat?" Jim chimes in, genuinely confused at this notion; "Matey, I've seen fatter blokes at the Olympics, what are you talking about?"

"Ah, you wouldn't get it," Blitz retorts, perhaps being too lazy to explain; "Anyways, big guy, looks like you'll soon have your house back to yourself. Just got to wait for fat fuck to confirm the coast is clear again, then will hit the road!"

"Until then," Jim adds, scratching his chin, "it seems I'm still stuck with your arse until and if that happens. ... Well, look, because this is probably the last day for the both of you here, ... we'll chill out here for the day, bugger it."

"Weren't you going to make Blitz here do some work for you; you know, as "rent,"" Loona reminds Jim with a smirk on her face directed at Blitz.

Blitz's eyes widened, shaking his head desperately at his daughter, whispering through his teeth; "Loonie- Loons, no- why've you gotta do this to me."

"Probably because it's fun," Loona smugly replies, that wide, betraying smirk on her face, though she meant no maliciousness.

Jim stops, thinking for a moment. He considers his options, finally looking back towards the pained Blitz who had a look of betrayal on his face like he was being sentenced in court for cooking meth.

Jim chuckles through his teeth, shaking his head and waving his hand away in dismissal; "Nah, stuff it! I'll give your old man here a rest, Loona; he's old and tired, needs his rest," he remarks.

Blitz grunts and mumbles something under his breath, obviously not taking the comment well, which he rarely ever did in regards to any criticism. Loona is the next to speak up as she gets up from her accustomed lounge chair and observes one of the cabinets, finding a row of DVD cases, one of them catching her eye. She raises her brow with curiosity, opening the glass doors and pulling the case which caught her attention.

"Why don't we watch this? This seems like something up your alley, Blitz," Loona suggests, handing the case to Blitz who examines it, trying to read the title with little success.

"I'm sorry, I can't read this. What is this, Jim-boy," Blitz capitulates, throwing it in Jim's hands.

Jim picks up the case and reads it for Blitz, immediately recognising what it is: "Oh, it's that mercenary documentary from the 70s! Loona's right, mate, I think you'll love this; It's pure, unfiltered footage of a group of mercenaries in... I think the Congo or something or other. Seeming you're pretty much a merc', I think you'll relate to this!"

Blitz scoffs, giving Jim a baffled look, almost incredulous; "What the f- Mercenary!? Excuse me, but I'm a professional! I PROFESSIONALLY murder!"

"So do mercenaries," Jim explains; "And if I remember correctly, Loona here told me you get paid to go out and kill certain people with weaponry in exchange for some serious cash, which is the very definition of a mercenary."

Blitz is taken aback, somewhat impressed with Jim's wit. He stutters before coming to his concluding defense: "Y-yeah- well... you see-... s-shut up."

Jim rolls his eyes before getting up from his chair, turning on the TV and slipping in the DVD contained inside. The three of them get comfortable, Loona opting to raid the fridge and bring out some things, mostly for herself. After a little while of loading, the documentary begins to play. The film goes on for a while, Loona watching it with mild interest of just how anarchistic the entire process of guerrilla warfare was. In many cases, the scenes did remind her of the things her associates got up to. Blitz, meanwhile, took the opportunity to become a running commentator on the things he personally thought these "guns-for-hire" were doing wrong:

"I mean- look at this idiot," Blitz bellowed from his 'high horse'; "He's got a machine gun in his hands and is just SPRAYING that holdout with bullets! Motherfucker- AIM THE FUCKING THING!"

"Shut up, I'm watching!" Loona says, keeping her eyes on the TV and momentarily looking down on her phone out of brief boredom and sipping on a can of lemonade she found, as Blitz opts to critique in his head with his flawless "expertise" in handling firearms.

The documentary lasts an hour and a half, Loona taking photos of both the man and imp next to her, a selfie of herself, and a brief 10-second video of Blitz continuing to claim to be a de-facto critic. As the documentary comes to a close, the familiar sound of Blitz's ringtone emanates from his pocket.

Blitz answers the phone promptly; "Hey hey, Mox! What's the latest? ... You're for certain? ... Okay, good, we'll meet you back there, give us an hour!"

"So, then," Jim concludes as he opens the cupboard to store the DVD and it’s casing away; "that's that then? You're both going home?"

"Seems so, Jim-boy," Blitz replies with a spring in his step, going to retrieve his firearm which he momentarily kept beside Jim's couch; "thanks for being such a good boy and letting us crash here for a couple of days! Your hospitality and presence was much appreciated!"

Jim shakes his head, grunting; "Same can't be said about you, you shortarse," Jim remarks back half-joking, with Blitz choosing to ignore the reply altogether.

With that, Loona returns to her room once again to retrieve her things that she bought earlier in the week, including the pajamas and jacket which she grew quite fond of. After a little while, Jim meets Blitz who was waiting on the front porch for the hellhound.

"So what are you going to do from now on without us," Blitz asks, breaking the silence, as the homeowner leaned on the post whilst running his fingers through his hair.

"I dunno, just do what I do everyday usually," Jim responds, looking out into the distance with a pensive look on his face; "I'll probably be alone again, as usual," he adds, laughing.

Blitz smirks at Jim with a knowing look in his eyes; "You're going to miss my Loonie, aren't you?"

Jim thinks about it before nodding; "I think so, yeah."

Blitz nods in a rare display of understanding the homeowner in a respectful manner. He then speaks again; "who knows, maybe we'll stop by sometime, but I will warn you very fucking firmly; no funny business with my daughter."

Jim shoots Blitz a glare, chuckling slightly; "With your mannerisms, matey, I'd rather you not," he half jokes.

"Oh come on, you LOVED my presence - everyone does!"

"I'll have to take your word for it," Jim bluntly replies, knowing full well that Blitz was, as per usual, full of shit.

Soon after, Loona emerges back outside onto the veranda from within the house, her few belongings folded on her arm. She looks back out onto the veranda and admires the remarkably clear day. The hellhound sighs, taking in the atmosphere once more as she puts her phone away before linking up with Blitz.

"Ready to go, Loonie Toonie," Blitz asks in his usually charismatic tone, just wanting to go home at this point after what was an incredibly mentally and physically exhausting week.

"You go ahead, Blitz, I'll catch up," Loona informs the imp.

Blitz obliges, heading off into the distance for a few meters before stopping to turn around; "You, uh, you coming yet, Loons or you going to stand around with that unwashed moron?"

"I will, just give me a minute, fuck!" She calls out to the imp before turning back around to Jim before she made her way back down the steps of the veranda; "Hey, look, before I finally fuck off... I want to say thank you for, you know, everything you've done; the help you've given me, the hospitality, and just for... being nice. I dunno why, but I feel that you've helped me open up more; I feel less isolated with dad, you know? Without you, well... without you this past week, I'm not sure if I would still be alive. Hell, I'd probably be dead in that ditch and I'd be found by some other idiot who'd put me on display as the "Wolf Woman" of fuck-knows-where."

"Nah, you're all good," Jim replies with a brief snicker at the remark, smiling briefly. Just before he finally sends her off to link up with her adoptive dad, he hesitates for a minute, not sure of what exactly to say next before continuing; "You think you'll ever come back? You know, thinking about it, I did enjoy your company and all. We could go hunting again, I know you enjoyed it."

Loona stops, thinking about the proposal. She looks back towards Blitz who was waiting across the road hidden in the tree line before turning back around; "You know what? I think I will; probably in a month I'd say or whenever I feel like it. I don't say this much and nor do I often feel this way, but I did like hanging with you. You're relaxed about everything and you're not an obnoxious little shit," Loona affirms, hinting at Blitz behind her in the distance with a smirk.

Jim smiles in return, glad to hear this. He extends his hand to shake hands with Loona, to which she obliges, shaking his hand firmly as well as pulling him close and patting his shoulder.

"I'll see you around, Jim," she smiles, pointing finger guns at him before adding; "And good luck with reuniting with your brother later!"

"Cheers!" Jim calls out as he watches the 'hound sprint across the road, following Blitz into the trees where he swore he could see something open up in the midst of the thicket. Before Loona completely enters the bush land, she stops and turns around to look at Jim who was standing there, watching her leave. She gives a brief wave to say goodbye, the homeowner doing so in return, before she turns back around and follows Blitz back into the portal before it closes.

Jim shakes his head, a somewhat melancholic look in his eyes. For the time being he was alone again, but hopefully if she was a hound of her word, Loona would return.

"See you later, you crazed bloody dog," he laughs to himself, before heading back inside to fix himself some late lunch.

(Act II) The Hellhound And The Owl

"Well, here we are," Loona announces, helping Octavia out through the portal and into the surrounding bushland.

"Woah," Octavia simply expresses, in awe of the incredibly new surroundings; "So, this is it?"

"Yup! It's nice, isn't it," the hellhound asks, making sense of where they were, though soon enough she knew through the help of some natural landmarks she had seen the month earlier.

This was the first time that Loona had returned to this side of Earth since the month prior, this time knowing how to return home, as well as bringing along Octavia to get her away from all the monotonous drama at home. On this occasion, Loona wore her usual gray crop top, the black jacket she had bought the month prior and a pair of long camouflage pants. Octavia meanwhile wore a long black pair of pants with some runners, a white t-shirt and her accustomed beanie.

"I'm really not sure about this," Octavia stutters, quite nervous and fidgety; "What if he's different this time then how you last saw him? What if it was an act?"

"Jim's okay, Octavia," Loona reassures with a kind smile, gently holding her shoulder to soothe her as they walk through the bushland, weaving in between trees and small dips in the terrain; "He may look tall and intimidating, but he is decent and welcoming; he just looks a bit rough around the edges. Hey, look; if he tries anything stupid or weird, I'll absolutely protect you."

"Mm... okay, if you say so," Octavia acknowledges, still nervous about having to meet someone completely new, let alone on Earth.

After walking a good couple of minutes through the scrub and noticing members of the local wildlife which Octavia observed with a kind of shy curiosity, they finally breached the end of the bushland, coming across a break where a road divided the land, a car passing by which they hid from just in case. Just across from them, up a slight hill, was Jim's home, looking very much the same as Loona remembered it.

"This is it," Loona informed the shy Octavia next to her who looked towards it with hesitancy to approach it; "What do you think?"

"It... it looks nice, I like the colours, I think," Octavia noted, getting a little closer to Loona for safety.

Loona notices this and gently pats her shoulder; "You ready to go up?"

Octavia thinks for a moment, her eyes shifting, before she finally nods slightly.

"Okay, follow me," Loona instructs her, before crossing the road quickly before making their way up over the gate and up the gravel and dirt path towards the house. A gentle breeze blowing down the hill itself, cooling them both down.

Octavia could feel herself getting more nervous by the minute, though Loona swearing she would protect her earlier managed to give her some type of reassurance that nothing could go too wrong. The two of them walk up onto the veranda, the floorboards creaking under their weight slightly, Octavia opting to hide behind Loona's back slightly, peering towards the door in worried anticipation.

Loona then proceeds to knock on the door, making sure to knock loudly in case he couldn't hear them. Initially, there was no reply. She knocks on the door again, this time a very familiar booming voice calling out from somewhere within: "Coming!"

Octavia hears the movement from within the house, becoming increasingly more nervous. She begins fidgeting with her beanie in her hands, trying to calm herself, wondering why the man inside was taking so long. What if he was planning something? Loona said something earlier before they arrived in this strange place that he had a gun; was he planning on ambushing them and shooting them? What if he was going to hold them hostage? These thoughts ran through her head, before she finally spoke, albeit softly to the hellhound in front of her:

"Loona- I'm sorry, I- I don't think I can do this," she stutters, her voice obviously very nervous.

"It's okay, just hold on to my hand. You'll be okay-," Loona tries to reassure, still looking at the door, both of them hearing the sound of loud footsteps on the floorboards approaching from the other side.

Unfortunately, the nervousness and thoughts of the occupant's intention overwhelmed Octavia who pulled away from Loona's hand and hurried away down the porch and around the side of the house to hide; "I'm sorry, I-I can't do it!"

Loona looks back towards Octavia, seeing her cower behind the other side of the house; "Hey, wait! Octavia!"

Jim finally opens the door, wearing his usual outing clothes, finding Loona standing in front of the entrance. The hellhound turns back around, meeting his eyes.

His eyes light up, a genuine welcoming smile forming on his face: "Oh shit, look who it is! Loona, mate, you came back!"

Loona smiles, putting her hand up briefly to say hello; "Hey, dude, long time no see," she replies, glancing behind her to try and find Octavia.

Jim notices this, confused; "What's up?"

Loona turns back around; "Look, I bought Octavia along with me and she's gotten nervous about meeting you. I think she's hiding around the house," she explains.

"Ah, yeah," Jim asks, looking in Loona's general line of sight, "I'll come out and meet with her, yeah? I take it she's a shy little thing."

Loona nods in confirmation, sympathy for Octavia reflected on her face; "She is, she's more or less a recluse like me. I think you should wait here on the porch and sit down on the steps, so you're as small as possible," Loona suggests, going to find Octavia. Jim obliges, going to sit on the steps up to the veranda, taking off his broadbrim hat so he wouldn't look as intimidating.

Loona, meanwhile, loops around the house to find her in the back, crouched down and trying her best to make herself small. The owl has got a look of genuine worry on her face, though is relieved to find Loona approaching her.

The hellhound crouches down as well, gently extending her hand towards Octavia; "Via, it's okay. He's not going to hurt you, I promise. I was just talking to him, he understands."

"...He doesn't have a gun or a knife on him, does he," Octavia quivers, holding on to Loona's hand tightly before huddling closer to the hellhound.

"No, no, nothing like that! It's all locked away! He's sitting down on the porch for you," Loona reassures as she leads the nervous Octavia back to the front, albeit slowly to give her a bit of time to gather her nerves; "Be brave, okay?"

Octavia nods slowly, her beanie resting over her eyes slightly to give her some form of comfort. At last, the pair of them arrive back to the front, finding Jim looking out into the horizon, only to turn his gaze to the duo approaching him. He maintains his sitting position, making himself as small and approachable as possible.

"Hey, again," Loona greets Jim once more, before showing Octavia who was huddled a bit behind her back; "So, yeah, this is Octavia."

Jim nods his head towards the owl, putting up his hand briefly to say hello; "Hey, Octavia, how's it going," he says in a softer, more welcoming voice.

"I'm... I'm okay," Octavia timidly responds, coming around from behind Loona; "A-are you Jim?"

"That's me," Jim informs, still sitting down and putting his hands up to show he meant no harm; "You want to come up and sit with us? Loona there will protect you, I know she will, but I promise you; there's no threat from me to you. Okay?"

Octavia thinks about it for a bit, looking at Loona who nods her head, smiling in reassurance. She turns her nervous and unsure gaze back towards Jim, nodding; "O-okay... I'll trust you."

Octavia, holding tightly onto Loona's hand, approaches Jim as he gets up slowly and makes his way to the front door, still attempting to make his new house guest feel as comfortable as possible.

"See? He's not a threat - he looks rough, but he's alright. He saved my life, after all," Loona reassured, sticking by Octavia's side.

"W-wait," Octavia asks, turning to look at Loona with a confused glance as they finally hopped onto the veranda; "What do you mean?"

"Oh, well," Loona explained, "It's a long story. In short, he found me almost passed out in that creek bed we crossed over, he took me in and for the week I was stuck here, we became close, I guess."

"You remind me a lot of Loona here, Octavia," Jim piped in, smiling welcomingly as he opened the door to let them both in; "Want to come inside?"

Octavia thought about it, looking at Loona for guidance; "Do you want to?"

Loona smiled, shrugging briefly; "Whatever you want to do, this is your little getaway as well."

The owl thought about it, looking inside; the interior hallway did look welcoming, all nice, clean and timeless. She thinks a little more, both the homeowner and hellhound completely understanding her hesitation and committing to being very patient. After a while, she nods with a very small and brief smile; "O-okay, sure."

Jim nods, obliging. He holds the door open, Loona walking in before saying "thank you", and the nervous Octavia expressing her thanks as well, albeit quietly, still nervous about the whole thing, though she was more comfortable with his understanding demeanor.

Loona leads Octavia to the couch, sitting with her to keep her comfortable. Jim walks in shortly after before heading into the kitchen and bringing out a steel tray of a jug of lemonade and some glasses with a few ice cubes in them, setting it on the coffee table, before sitting in his lounge chair and turning it around to face them.

Loona is the first to take her glass, filling it up with the jug. She sips it a little to show the hesitant Octavia that there was nothing in it. This helped Octavia slowly take her full glass and cautiously

take a sip. It tasted fresh, slightly bitter yet sweet.

"T-thank you so much," Octavia expressed her gratitude to Jim, who nodded with a smile as he scratched his neck briefly.

"So, what's been happening, Jim," Loona asks Jim from across the coffee table, crossing her legs.

Jim chuckles, sipping his beverage; "Ah, nothing much. Been working, been hunting. It's been a good past month. At long last reunited with Paul last week with mum and dad. He's different from what I remember him, and not the bad type of difference either. Turns out he got involved with the wrong people and had to make a run for it for our sakes," Jim explains to the mild surprise of Loona.

"So, Paul is... your brother," Octavia pipes in, feeling increasingly more comfortable with Jim's presence.

"He is! How'd you know, did Loona tell you," Jim asks, with Octavia nodding, confirming his suspicions as being true.

"What about you, Loona," Jim asks in return; "how you been doing, what's been up?"

Loona huffs, shrugging; "Oh, you know. Same old shit I have to deal with. Blitz is fine, he's... actually improved somewhat. Like he's not that pushy anymore, he asks if I want privacy and all that. Sure, he can still be an asshole to people, but he's become more... chill with me, you know what I'm saying?"

Jim raises his brow, surprised to hear this; "Huh. So he's actually capable of change?"

Loona shrugs; "It looks like it, I think. And that Moxxie guy I told you about, I've noticed I've stopped giving him as much shit as I used to. I dunno, but something tells me staying out here for more than a day or so is therapeutic for me. As I said a month ago to you, when you beat yourself up about being a "dullard", it's peaceful out here. Also why I bought Octavia."

Jim smiles, laughing warmly; "Well, I'm glad to hear. And I suppose meeting someone as, well, bizarre as you has been interesting. Even now you look intimidating, but hey, what can I do?"

Loona chuckles, grinning; "I'm always going to look frightening, dude. That's a given!"

"What about you, Octavia," Jim turns his attention to Octavia who was listening carefully, though perhaps still timid; "Want to talk about or ask anything?"

She thinks for a moment, before finally speaking; "Uhm... you, uh, want to ask me something?"

"I suppose," Jim asks; "Alright, here's one; what do you like doing?"

Octavia hesitates once again for a minute before answering, drinking the lemonade which she had grown fond of; "It probably sounds weird, but.. I like taxidermy."

Jim raises his brow, genuinely interested; "Ahh, taxidermy? Well, shoot, I know a bloke who does taxidermy; lives about ten minutes away from here. An older gentleman I once met in the pub, his name's Rob. He owns a little store with some taxidermy stuff, maybe Loona and I will get something back for you from there."

"R-really," Octavia asks, her so-far shy demeanor perking up slightly; "T-that would be nice of you."

Jim pours himself another glass before speaking again; "So! You're staying for the next couple of days, yeah?"

"That's the plan," Loona informs, looking at Octavia who nodded at Jim as a second source of confirmation; "What have you got planned for us?"

"Oh, I got some ideas," Jim replies as he pours Octavia another bit of lemonade upon request. And with that, their half-week getaway began.

Recurring Familial Dilemma

The morning passed slowly, both Loona and Octavia getting talkative with the homeowner once more over their beverages as conversation continued, with Octavia becoming increasingly more confident and comfortable with her surroundings and this young man before them. Sure, she was still nervous, but her confidence had drastically improved as she no longer felt that her life could be in danger - even if it was, she had Loona to the right of her. This little getaway was also an opportunity for both Loona and Octavia to get to know each other better - their initial meeting in the hills overlooking the stars above them on the Western Coast of California was so brief and improper, so essentially, this was the first time they ever properly bonded together in camaraderie. So far, Octavia was enjoying it despite her initial reservations about Loona's human friend who was now chattering away about whatever topic he was invested in, narrating it to his house guests like a lecturer. Though somewhere deep down in the back of her mind troubled her - something that she had bought along with her from back home.

"Anyhow, so that's how that turned out - one ego healed and my legs completely shot," Jim concludes after recalling to Octavia about the day he almost died at the hands of a huge boar the day he went hunting with Blitz.

"Rough," Octavia simply replies, quite honestly intrigued at this retelling. "Did he ever apologize to you for almost, you know, essentially killing you?"

"Matey, I wish," Jim scoffs; "He's as full of himself as he is a shortarse, as if he would. But he is Loona's dad so I can't say too much."

"Shit-talk about him as much as you like, man, I don't give a fuck," Loona shrugs with a smirk as she sips the last of her drink, the ice gently tapping around the edge of the glass.

The young man cackles slightly as he gets up with a heave to take the empty glasses back to the kitchen counter. He waltzes on over to the kitchen after collecting Octavia's glass and dumps the leftover contents in the sink, rubbing his hands before shoving them in his trouser pockets; "Righto, so… what did we all feel like doing first? We got a few options here, I suppose; we could head into town and you two go do what you want, hey?"

"I wouldn't mind going out," Octavia blankly concedes, looking towards Loona to the right of her; "W-would you want to? I kinda wanna get a jacket like yours."

Loona is pleasantly taken aback as she smiles at this suggestion; “Hey, I don’t see why not. What, you wanna match with me, do you?”

“Heh- I guess,” Octavia shyly confirms as she shifts on the couch before being nudged lightly in the shoulder by Loona in a show of friendly banter. Octavia nudges back as she softly smiles, being glad that she had a friend like this hellhound next to her, no matter how unlikely said friendship was.

“Alright, that settles it then,” Jim concedes as he claps his hands together; “I’ll be waiting outside when you two are ready, yeah?”

“Got it,” Loona responds, clicking her fingers and pointing in his general direction as the young man goes to sit outside, taking his hat along with him. The hellhound then steps a few feet back as she proceeds to change into her human form with a wave of sudden energy. After her change was complete, she fixes up her black jacket and dusts off her camouflage pants, patting them down to make sure they were presentable before turning to Octavia; “How do I look?”

“You look great,” Octavia observes, who as well had turned into her human form, her feathers on her head replaced with long black hair which loomed past her shoulder; “Do I look okay?”

“Pffft- of course you do, don’t worry about that,” Loona reassures with a smile as she goes to the couch to pick up the bag that they had bought along with them for this little getaway - In this bag was Loona and Octavia’s means of traveling home; “You want me to carry this around?”

Octavia shrugs; “Only if you want to, I can do it though if you’d like. Don’t want to be useless, you know?”

“Hey, don’t say that about yourself,” Loona refutes as she throws the bag over her shoulders; “You’re not useless, worthless or whatever-the-fuck people might say; they say that just to drag you down.”

“I know that, I just.. I want to help as well though if you need it,” Octavia sighs as it became obvious to Loona that something was bothering her.

Loona may be a lot of things to people; rude, arrogant, abrupt, so on and so forth, but if there was one thing that she was definitely, it was being a professional in seeing through people, and from what she could tell, something was definitely bothering her newfound friend - it was perhaps obvious from their last conversation what that "something" was. Loona gives off a sympathetic and knowing smile to Octavia before gently holding her shoulder as they make their way outside onto the veranda through the hallway to the entrance door; "Try to keep your mind off of what your parents argue about, okay? You're here with me. You're away from all that bullshit."

Octavia's eyes shifted a little as she thought about Loona's wording. Though she understood that the hellhound now turned human was just trying to reassure her, she felt deep down as if Loona wasn't quite understanding something. Nonetheless, Octavia softly smiles despite her reservations, following Loona closely behind as they made their way back out to meet Jim once more.

"Ready when you are, cowboy," Loona teases Jim as they find him leaning on the veranda's railing.

"Aye aye, boss-lady," Jim remarks back with a laugh as they all get into the Ute that was now parked outside, its gray coat shimmering slightly in the sun.

Jim shuffles his way into the driver's seat while Loona opts to shift into the space in the middle, allowing for Octavia to have the furthest space to the window. After checking that everything was in order including but not limited to belongings and comfort, the "cowboy" started the car and without further ado drove the vintage old pick-up down the gravel and dirt driveway and then turning right at the main road, at long last heading into town. Octavia rested her hand on the ledge of the window, looking outside at her surroundings, noting just how clear and pristine everything was - she felt the stresses of home and everything associated with it almost leave her conscience and thoughts as she at last had something distracting to look at, though it still persistently clung onto the back of her mind for the time being. She looks into the almost clear sky above them, wondering how the view of the stars would be out here when night finally loomed over them like a veil. After a few minutes of driving, Jim at last reaches the moderately busy town center. There were people, many people, of different jobs and lives going about their daily lives, some tall and some short, some older and some younger who lived simple lives that Octavia wished she had - if only it were that simple to achieve that wish she honestly yearned for.

After slowing down quite a bit, Jim pulled the Ute off into a free curbside parking spot, straightening the vehicle up before putting the old girl in park and pulling the handbrake; "Righto you two, here we are. I'll be over at the general store down the road if you two need me for anything - in the meantime, knock yourselves out," Jim announces with a smile as he opens his driver's side door.

“Sir, yes sir. Any more orders, sir?” Loona sarcastically replies with a teasing, light-hearted smirk as Octavia opens the door to get out, taking in the atmosphere.

“Yeah, nah, not at the moment, private smartarse.” Jim banters back with a cackle as he leans on the bonnet of his car, waiting for his passengers to get out which they eventually did so, shutting the door as Jim inserted the key into the door and turned the lock. After waving his passengers off, Jim took off across the road and further down the footpath, disappearing into the small crowds on the street.

Octavia observed her surroundings with curious eyes as she took in her surroundings, at last able to properly make head-or-tails as to where Loona had taken her. She noted of just how seemingly clean and refreshing the air she was breathing was, noting how it seemed to clear her head and just how oddly easy it was to breathe. One dumb phrase popped into her mind which made her snort in brief amusement; she was breathing premium oxygen. Bar from the usual rubbish thrown to the side of the road in very small areas, the streets were remarkably pristine and the smell of, say, rot and filth was absent - if only she had thought about a place like this to go to instead of that disease-ridden Los Angeles, she thought to herself. The locals as well seemed normal and not just a bunch of obnoxious overly-eccentric smart-asses with something to prove. Of course you had the odd-looking person in the streets around her which seemed to be asking for trouble, or at least to cause it, but those types around here were seemingly very few and far between to Octavia's obvious relief. If only... if only dad could take some time with his daughter to take her calm, laid-back places like this instead of running around and- wait, where did this thought come from? Octavia shakes her head from this intrusive thought as she turns to Loona who was waving her over to come walk together.

“Whatcha felt like doing first? We got the whole morning to ourselves now,” Loona asks, turning towards Octavia who was slowly walking next to her side-by-side as they observed their surroundings, the rows of shops and businesses to their left. Octavia observed just how much there was in regards to choice for things to look at, just a whole range of products and goods to choose from and to look at - in all honesty with herself, Octavia couldn't catch up with all of it staring right back at her.

“Honestly? I-I think I’m fixated on that jacket,” Octavia smiles as she looks through the windows of the stores they passed with a deep and inquisitive curiosity.

Loona chuckles through her teeth, finding the “human’s” fascination in her jacket amusing; “Heh- Aight, aight, good choice ‘cause it’s just up this way. We’re not too far now,” Loona informs as she points to a store through the people that passed by the opposite direction.

The store Loona was gesturing to with a slightly outstretched arm was an older store which sold general clothing, everything from hats to shoes and everything in-between with a range of colors and styles. It appeared older and more time-period set in appearance compared to the other stores around it, with black borders with golden lining around the larger display windows, resembling something from the nineteen-twenties. After a couple more feet, Loona turns into the store with Octavia by her side as they made their way in, the active vent of an air conditioner above welcoming them as they walked through the entrance.

Behind the counter was an older woman with narrow glasses and hair which was just about becoming gray who greeted her two new customers: “Good morning, you two,” she nodded with a small smile as the duo walked in. She wore a bright-blue blouse with a long vintage black skirt which stretched down just above her ankles.

“Hey there.” Loona responded with a slight two-fingered salute as she walked up to the counter with her hands in her jacket’s pockets; “Hey, uh, you may remember me from around a month ago, I bought this jacket, which I absolutely love by the way.”

“..Ah yes! You’re that young lady that got into that fight with those teens, didn’t you?” the older lady replies, at last remembering where she had seen Loona's face before.

Loona sighs, remembering that moment reluctantly; “Yep, that would be me. But yeah, anyway; I was wondering if you had another one of these jackets in here? My friend here wants one, too.”

“I think we do; we got one last one if I remember. Try down towards the back wall, it could be there.”

“Got it, thank you,” Loona obliges as she follows Octavia who had enthusiastically made a beeline straight to the back wall where, Lo and behold, the black jacket was still on display, practically waiting there for Octavia’s arrival.

Via eyes the jacket with a shine in her eyes, practically falling in love with it as she poked and prodded the fabric which felt nice in her eager hands. Without much more delay, she carefully takes the jacket off the coat rack and tries it on, walking over to a mirror to check herself out. As soon as she approaches the mirror with this new bit of clothing, Octavia’s eyes lighten up.

“Yes! Oh my- yes! Loona, please, I need this! Oh my stars- it looks so good!” Octavia enthusiastically begs, practically melting over how much she had fallen in love with it.

Loona laughs at this little display, happy at the fact that her friend was ecstatic; “Haha- alright, okay there, settle down Via! You’ll explode the way you’re going if you don’t watch out. Don’t worry, I’ll get it for you.”

The both of them head towards the front counter of the store with Loona immediately handing the store owner a couple of dollar bills before confirming that the jacket was all that was going to be bought. The store owner obliges as she sends the duo off, Octavia being the first to leave as she gushes at the jacket she was now wearing. Loona casually strolls out with her hands in her pockets, finding Octavia coming up to her with a wave of energy;

“Please be honest, Loona - how do I look?”

“You’re killing it, Via.” Loona replies with a smile as they make their way back down the footpath; “Felt like getting something to eat? I’m wasting away here.”

“I don’t see why not,” Via obliges with a little spring in her step as she huddles close to Loona with matching jackets.

They browse around for a little bit before at last coming up to a small quiet cafe which they both agreed would make a nice spot to hang around to kill some time. They pick a table which was nestled inside which has a menu for the both of them, Loona flicking through her phone while Octavia eagerly eyed the laminated sheet in her hands. After a bit of consideration and much thinking, she opted for a small plate of chips while Loona, practically wasting away from hunger, ordered herself a steak sandwich of sorts.

“How are you finding all this? Are you comfortable?” Loona inquired as she returned from the counter after ordering their food.

“Oh, it’s fun!” Via replies immediately; “Thanks for doing this for me.”

“Hey. Don’t even mention it,” Loona obliges as she looks down at her phone once more as she passes the time; “You should come out every-so-often with me - gets you away from everything.”

“Heh, I-I guess so,” Octavia quietly replies, her tone becoming slightly dimmer.

Something had returned to Via’s thoughts which before this point had been suppressed while she was distracted with getting used to her new surroundings; the stress and reality of her situation at home. Technically, she was her parent’s outlet for their problems; sometimes she felt as if she was the reason for their problems, if not a product of it. It didn’t help with the fact that both Octavia’s parents didn’t understand her personal feelings either; her father was mostly running around and doing his own thing while she was forced to tag along, while her mother practically forgot about her existence. Unfortunately, despite Loona’s effort to comfort her that time in Los Angeles under the stars that her father was ‘trying’, it really didn’t feel that way. Nothing had gotten any better, it was all just the same old drama between Stolas and Stella, a household separated by divorce; a mother and father separated both figuratively and literally, her mother having since moved out. If anything, Octavia felt more like a bargaining chip, having to live with her father for five days a week whilst living with her mother on the weekends.

If anything, Octavia felt used.

There was always something happening back in hell which Octavia was caught in the middle like a trapped rat in a cage, something that she couldn’t run away from despite her wishes to. Even when Octavia wasn't involved, she felt completely left out of the loopl completely powerless to make her own decisions with regards to her parents' marriage she knew full well had long-since deteriorated beyond saving. Loona was wrong; her dad wasn’t “trying”, he was just his usual, unfocused self with dumb urges to chase after Blitz for “favors”. Why couldn’t her dad and Blitz just be normal friends? Did it always have to be creepy anytime he was mentioned?

In all honesty? Octavia didn’t like it. She hated it, she really fucking hated-

“Via? Hey, you okay there?? Hey Via??”

Octavia blinks a bit before looking back up, her full attention back onto Loona who was now looking at her with worried eyes. Via had been zoning out, thinking about the stresses back home. At this point, she had a few options; tell the truth to Loona or continue as if nothing had ever happened? Was it even worth their time to discuss it? Shit, why couldn’t have she just left it at home?

“Via? Are you alright-”

“No. No, Loona, I am not alright...” Octavia bluntly replied before Loona could finish.

Loona is taken aback slightly, surprised at Octavia’s sudden bluntness; “What’s the matter, what’s going on-”

“You wouldn’t understand. You just- you don’t understand.”

“Wh-?… Via, what do you mean??” Loona asks with confusion and concern in her voice.

Octavia stares into Loona’s eyes with a troubled look on her face. She didn’t know what to say or how to even begin - this was all beginning to get too overwhelming; “I… Loona, I… give me a minute,” Octavia abruptly demands as she gets up from her chair and walks out the store with a brisk walk.

Loona watches with worry as the “human” practically rushes out of the cafe and down the road; “Via? Hey-hey! What’s wrong? Where are you going??”

There was no reply as Loona helplessly watched Octavia vanish out of her sight as she briskly walked up the footpath. Without a moment’s more delay, Loona gets up to follow her up the road but not before telling the employee at the cafe to reserve their seat for the moment.

Loona briskly made her way toward Octavia’s general location, calling out to her from time to time to get her attention; “Octavia! H-hey, wait up!!”

It was absolutely no use as after hopelessly trying to follow after her, Loona finally lost sight of her among a small crowd. As said small crowd dissipates, Octavia was nowhere to be seen which concerned Loona deeply. What had made her so upset that she would just run away from her like this? Was it something she said?

Loona huffs as she continued onward, looking down alleyways and calling out Octavia’s name in a seemingly hopeless struggle to find her. There was something definitely going on, Loona thought to herself, and damn-right was she going to find out what it was. Without further delay, Loona made her way up the road. She called Via’s name hopelessly, trying to figure out in vain where she could have possibly ended up.

…

It was hopeless. It was all so bloody hopeless.

Octavia sat alone under a large tree further up the road, hidden behind a large accumulation of shrubbery and foliage. For the moment, she was hidden; Via didn't think she had the guts to confront Loona again after she practically snapped at her in the cafe. She had fucked it up; She had the opportunity to get to know someone who could possibly understand her position, and she just had to fuck it up. Who was Octavia kidding? Nobody would understand her - she'll always just be known as another rude bitch who let the money get to her head. In fact, she bet that she would turn out exactly like her parents - always arguing, always bickering, and always-

"Via! Dude, where are you??"

Octavia is suddenly jolted as she hears Loona's voice call out from the footpath. It was just a matter of time before she was discovered, she just knew it - hellhounds were good at tracking like this. To her expectations, she found herself looking at Loona, still in her human form, who had just emerged from around the accumulation of bushes, and stopped just a few feet short of the lonesome Via who was huddled under the tree.

"Octavia, what's-… what's going on??" Loona asks with a worried look on her face as she softens her voice.

"...You wouldn't understand, Loona, you just-... you wouldn't get it..." Octavia mumbles as she begins to feel herself tear up.

"What wouldn't I get-"

"Everything! Just everything about me; my position, what I'm going through with my parents, what I'm going to turn… t-turn out like. Admit it, Loona, you think I'm just another rich prick. You think you get what I'm going through, but you don't - you just don't."

Loona freezes as she listens to Octavia's rant, her eyes shifting to try and think about an answer; "But, Via… I don't think you are that at all. Where are you getting this from??"

"I don't know, I… I just don't know..." Via concedes as tears began to well up in her eyes.

Loona felt absolutely terrible for Via now huddled under this tree. After a bit of hesitation, she slowly goes to sit down in the grass next to the "human" and turns her head to look at her; "Could you help me understand what you're going through?"

"I don't think I can-"

"But you can." Loona interrupted with a calm tone; "I want to understand what you're going through. I hate to admit it but I have to; I can be wrong at times and misunderstand other's positions. Hell, I do that with Moxxie! Though he's still an ass... You're safe to tell me, Via, so please do so I can make this better; what have I misunderstood?"

"...Dad… you've misunderstood what's going on between me and dad…"

"Have I?" Loona asks, tilting her head ever-so-slightly.

"Yes… I-I'm sorry, Loona, but dad isn't trying; he's not trying at all! He always says he's trying but I know that's just to keep me quiet as he… as he gushes over your dad all the time, among other things. It's constant whenever his name or presence is brought up. I just want-... I just want them to be, you know, normal with each other. I really don't mind them talking, but I hate how constantly creepy he is about Blitz."

"Is… Is that why you needed to walk away just now?" Loona interjected, trying to understand with her brow furrowed in thought.

"Partly..?" Octavia whimpers; "I was also kind of scared I… I would snap at you if I stayed any longer there."

“Oh.. Okay, I get you.” Loona sympathizes as she thinks on something to say properly in response to the topic of her dad. Should she say it, or would it make things worse? For whatever reason, Loona decided to go for it; “Could I maybe say something as well, about your dad?”

Octavia turns her conflicted gaze towards the “human” next to her, hesitating for a minute before she nods slightly to the relief of Loona who was just about to assume she had made the wrong thing to say.

“About your dad, I’d like to say- look, please don’t get offended, but… I find him a little bit too hands-on with dad as well, you know what I mean?” Loona winces a little as she forces herself to let it out.

“Y…you do?”

“I guess?” Loona shrugs; “To be completely honest with you? The feeling is mutual. I mean- I don’t mind them if they, as you said, just talked for the moment. I do wish they toned it the fuck down that bit more. It really does get uncomfortable, so I get where you’re coming from as a daughter. It's... confusing, I get it. You try to figure out if they truly love each other or not, but... but you just don't see it. Feels just like another "one night stand" kind of situation.”

“R-right? At least I’m not alone in realizing this...” Octavia sniffles, wiping some tears from her eyes.

“Heh. of course you’re not, dude. You’ve got me to share the pain with you with matching jackets and all that jazz,” Loona smiles gently as she gently patted Octavia’s shoulder.

Octavia briefly exhales through her nose as she finds humor through her sadness, at last Loona being able to cheer her up even if it was just a little bit; “I’m glad, I suppose. Dammit, but what are we going to do? How can I- no, we tell them about how we feel about them being really awkward and confusing with each other?”

“To be honest? I really don’t know,” Loona capitulates to the slight disappointment of Octavia; “What we can do for now is we can share the pain, we’ll get through this together. But look; I’m sure we’ll figure out a way to approach it. I promise I’ll help you, someway or another.”

“...Y-You will?”

Loona nods with a reassuring smile and her hand on Via’s shoulder; “Of course.”

“...A-and what about the divorce that's happening between mum and dad?”

Loona shrugs; “I’ll keep taking you out places. That’s my solution; get you away from their bullshit. Hell, I’ll even take you back out here if you’d like! Jim would understand. He somehow understood me, even after all the bullshit I gave him when I was stuck here. Your parents may not know it, but you don’t deserve to be in the middle of all that! I’m sorry to hear that they haven't realized this yet.”

“It’s okay...” Octavia quietly says as she suddenly gives Loona a light hug; “T-thank you for checking on me and for trying to understand.”

Loona huffs lightly as she hugs her back, patting Via on her back gently; “Don’t mention it, twerp. Anytime. So, you still want to eat?”

“Definitely,” Via smiles, wiping the final tears from her eyes as she gets up and follows Loona back to the cafe; “I’m beginning to starve as well.”

After a short walk the duo finally returned to the cafe and returned to their seats where, to their pleasant surprise, their food was waiting for them and luckily still fresh. Loona began lightly chowing down on her food while Octavia ate hers at a slower rate while savoring the taste. Octavia quietly ate the contents of her plate slowly as she looked down slightly, at last feeling that her previous reservations had been answered to the best of Loona's ability. Now of course, it wasn't a concrete solution and could use with some work in future, but for the moment it was a direction for the often conflicted Via to take; a direction which she was very much appreciative of. Every-so-often, Loona would take a break from eating to double-check with her friend if she was still okay, then to be reassured by Octavia that she was okay for now in response, thanking her "big sister" for checking up on her state of mind. In order to help her friend keep her mind off of her troubles for the moment, Loona went on to tell a few stories from her life that she thought would intrigue Octavia in terms of interesting topics, with great success as well.

After a little while of eating, at long last they were finished. Loona paid for the food and drink shortly after finishing as they made their way back to the Ute to find Jim waiting on the side of it, sitting on the bonnet. He perks up as he notices the two “humans” approaching him.

“Finally back, hey?”

“Yup! Sorry we took so long,” Loona chuckles as she comes up to him while Octavia stands closely behind.

“Nah, don’t worry about it, matey. So, what now; you wanna head down to that taxidermy place I told you about, Octavia?”

“Sure, if you want to take me,” Octavia nods gently.

“Yeah, nah, I don’t mind the drive. What about you, Loona? You felt like going?” Jim asks as he turns his gaze to Loona who took a photo of herself in a brief show-off pose.

“Sure, I wouldn’t mind checking it out-”

“You! H-Hey, I recognise you!”

Suddenly a voice interrupted the conversation, Loona turning around to see who it was. Approaching her was a woman, presumably in her late 30s with a long shirt, jeans and wavy hair with the tackiest of earrings approaching her while pointing to Loona with a sneering stare. To the annoyance of many of the locals who stared at this mess of a woman as she shoved by them in a walk that more resembled a mad drunk of a murderous rampage, she stumbled up to Loona within mere feet from her face, her personal space so incredibly close to almost being violated as she jabs her sun-tanned finger in Loona's face; “You- you almost broke my son’s arm!”

“Your wha- OH, was that your son, was it,” Loona asks with a smirk, almost immediately realizing that this stranger was talking about the altercation she had with the local thugs the month before.

“Yes. It. Was! You’re lucky I wasn’t there to stop you, or-”

“Or else what, lady? You’re gonna fight me? Your shithead, asshole son had it coming, and let me tell you; he got a real nice ass-beating, I made sure of that!”

“You TRAUMATIZED him,” the lady retorts in protest.

“And I was right to traumatize that little waste of space! How about raising your kids properly so someone doesn’t have to discipline them on your behalf, huh,” Loona fires back with a wide and provocative grin.

The lady was now visibly furious; “Oh, I swear you bitch, im gonna-”

“Why don’t you back off before this escalates any further, matey,” Jim intervenes, addressing the lady; “Besides, she’s right; little cunt had it coming for a long time. Don’t be a dickhead and piss right off.”

The stranger is left speechless, about to say something more in return before at last holding her tongue and storming right off to sulk in self-pity from her verbal loss. Octavia looks on in confusion as she hid behind Loona from the random lunatic on the street, watching as her tacky earrings bobbed up and down as she hobbled away like a goose with arthritis.

“W-who the fuck was that,” Octavia finally asked in bewilderment as she hopped into the car along with Loona.

“Seems to be the ever-so-charming mom of those assholes I had a fight with, at least from what I could tell by the verbal liquid shit she just threw at us,” Loona informs, still satisfied that she managed to put that flamed-up bitch in her place, albeit with an intervention from Jim; “Did you understand any of what she said, Jim?”

“Not a fucking clue,” Jim played along, chuckling at Loona’s most lovely remark as he drove the Ute out of town and off into the direction of the taxidermist store that had been mentioned earlier.

Taxidermists And Other Individuals

After a good half an hour of driving in the westerly direction, the trio at long last arrive into a similar township compared to the one they had just come from. It was smaller and more isolated with a gas station on the main road; this is where Jim resorted to parking the vehicle where a large tree hung over the parking spaces, providing the area under it with plenty of shade. Across the road from this gas station was a small row of old stores, and at one end was the aforementioned taxidermy store with long-since faded letters advertising it as such. The white exterior paint was cracked and peeling and the old, red entrance door displayed a sign through its window which read in bold letters; “open”.

Octavia perks up with keen interest as she notices the store in question while standing close to Loona who had gotten out of the car with a grunt, having grown tired of sitting for so long. Loona momentarily flexes her shoulders and arms as she yawns, finding herself almost dozing off from the drive there. It was only when Octavia gently nudged her arm when the “human” at long last snapped out of her drowsy state.

“C-can we go over, please,” Octavia asks with a hushed tone, though her tone of voice did attempt with limited success to hide her eagerness.

Loona snickers as she looks to the excited Octavia who was practically brimming with anticipation of what she was to find; “Alright, alright! We’re going, just- promise not to explode with excitement on me, ‘kay?”

“No guarantees,” Via quips back as a joke as they make their way across the momentarily quiet road, a break in the traffic allowing them to cross safely.

“We’ll be over here,” Loona calls out to Jim who was sitting on the back of his Ute, to which he calls back with a “No worries!”

Out of sheer anticipation and for the first time during this weekend with her hellhound friend, Octavia slowly breaks away from Loona’s arm to quietly open the door, allowing herself to enter the old building before her. She is immediately met with that smell of antiques and age usually associated with old structures such as this one as she observes her surroundings. Loona, meanwhile, followed closely behind as the hellhound in her human form looked down at her phone for a moment. For what it was, this old taxidermist’s store was well-kept and plentiful in terms of what it had available; it wasn’t too large of a building though the amount of stuff that was in it was phenomenal. Not only were there taxidermies on display such as small birds and the odd wild

rodent, but there was also an entire shelf of old records for sale towards the back wall which managed to capture Loona's attention. Oddly enough, however, there didn't seem to be anyone behind the small counter at the front of the store, though from somewhere behind the back wall there was the sound of movement where an old timber door was, obviously leading to another room where presumably the owner of the store currently resided.

Octavia once again breaks away from Loona who was making her way over to look at the record collection. Octavia, meanwhile, begins examining every example of taxidermy that caught her keen eye, which was practically the entire store. The first one that stood out to her was a species of native sparrow which was perched on top of an artificial branch, its head turned to its left as if it was examining its surroundings. The intrigued Octavia slowly takes it off the shelf to examine it more closely, in awe of just how alive it looked.

Just as both Loona and Octavia are stuck examining everything with mild interest, the back-door opens to reveal a young man with blonde hair as he emerges from behind the door. The young man in question was probably no older than his late teenage years, and wore a dark-blue collared shirt and a pair of light-brown cargo shorts which ended over his knees, all completed with a pair of black work-boots.

Loona was right next to the door so she is the first "human" that the young man finds; "Can I help you, ma'am?"

"Not really, just looking," Loona responds with a mild tone as she turns her gaze back towards one of the records she was holding.

"No worries. Just so you know, I've got more of those records in the back," the mild-mannered young man announced as he made his way behind the counter to sort out some cash he had in the tiller.

"Got it," Loona replies as she flipped through the other records on display, seriously debating whether or not she should pick one up; "Oh hey, how much for one of these?"

The young man turns his gaze towards Loona from the front of the store; "Those records? Give or take, probably around sixty dollars a piece."

Loona raises her brow as she looks back down at the record she was holding, trying to make a decision. The young man's attention is drawn away from Loona when Octavia speaks up with the

native sparrow still in her hands; “What about this?”

“About forty-five,” the store clerk replies as he closes the tiller after completing his task; “you two into taxidermy at all?”

“I’m not, but she loves it to death,” Loona explains as she makes her way over to the front counter after having put the record back after much consideration - what the hell was she going to do with a record anyway?

Octavia’s eyes shift a little between the statue and Loona, practically begging for it to be bought with a glint in her eyes; “You don’t mind if I… we…”

“You know I’m going to get it for you, nerd,” Loona responds with an endeared chuckle as she hands the store clerk a fifty dollar bill; it really made Loona’s day to at last see this little companion of hers intrigued with something she genuinely enjoyed.

Octavia eagerly received the protective timber box which contained the statue Loona had so generously bought for her inside, holding it firmly with both hands in an upright position so that nothing could be possibly damaged. She walks closely side-by-side with Loona, crossing the road once more to sit on a picnic table which was obscured by the large gum tree’s shadow. Loona sits lazily with her legs up, across from her companion who couldn’t help herself but take the taxidermy out of its container to observe it under the light, turning it slowly around with her fingers as her eyes glint with a deep fixation. Loona decides to sneak a picture of the statue by aiming her phone camera at a suitable angle and taking a shot, making sure to include Octavia’s face behind it.

“Tsk- I can tell you love that thing,” Loona snickers with a small endeared smile.

“Hm? Oh, f-for sure,” Octavia exclaims with a hint of enthusiasm as she rotates the statue on top of the old wooden table; “Just look at this! usually you’d see a hint of stitching somewhere around the body or the head but no, you can’t see them at all on this one! It’s just- aaah! I’m in love with just how-.. how alive it looks!”

Loona raises her eyebrow while noticing these little details; “Huh… you’re right! It’s a little creepy, isn’t it?”

“What is?”

“Having something dead on display and it looks so alive,” Loona further explains; “It’s interesting, though, as in, who came up with the idea of it in the first place?”

Octavia shrugs; “I dunno, probably someone insane!”

Loona nods in agreement with this; “Oh for sure! Probably more insane than the clients we get!”

Octavia chuckles at this thought; “I can just imagine. … Oh hey, you got anything you’re interested in?”

Loona shrugs a little after a few seconds of thinking; “Uhh.. other than rock, metal, and partying? I don’t know, to be honest.”

“Oh, come on! You must like something else,” Octavia prods for a better answer, finding a newfound confidence to socialize.

“… I guess I like being outside,” Loona considers after thinking further on the topic.

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

“Oh, you know… you tend to feel free when you’re outside. Being inside at home is one thing, but being outside in all this while you’re alone? Just pure… bliss, I think the word is,” Loona evaluates with serious consideration.

“What about with me,” Octavia asks quietly.

“Oh, no no, I didn’t mean I don’t like hanging out with you! I meant that the change in scenery clears your head - which is why I brought you here,” Loona elaborates with a reassuring look, not wanting for Octavia to take any accidental offense.

“Yeah, I know what you’re saying,” Octavia acknowledges as she nods along; “So, you like partying then?”

“Sometimes, yeah - uh, I mean I probably do it more than I’d like to admit,” Loona admits while flinging a fly away with her hand which buzzed in her ear.

“Hm! Maybe you could take me along to one of them,” Octavia lightens up at the suggestion.

Loona, however, wasn’t too enthusiastic about it; “Ah, hah, about that… I don’t think you’d be suited for those parties, I mean, even I get uncomfortable with half of the dumbasses and other assorted fucktards who attend them.”

“How do you mean,” Octavia asks inquisitively.

Loona sweats a little as she slowly shakes her head; “Hah- put it this way; what happens at these parties isn’t very, uh, nice if you get the gist of what I mean. A lot of drunks, a lot of perverts, a lot of just dumb shit. There’s been parties I’ve gone to where I’ve had to come home early because of just how… just how fucked up they get, to the point where it becomes impossible to enjoy, even for me!”

“No kidding,” Octavia responds with mild awe.

“Yup! And, y-yeah, the last thing I want is you getting hurt because some guy named ‘fuckwit’ does something that… isn’t very nice.”

“What if I wanted to try,” Octavia refutes a little bit, her curiosity probably getting the better of her.

Loona looks at her friend with caring eyes and a small smile before gently patting her on her left arm; “Via… if there’s one thing you will learn, and to be fair I should learn this too, is that just because you CAN do something, doesn’t mean you necessarily SHOULD.”

“I know, I know,” Octavia concedes as she carefully puts the taxidermy statue away, being ever-so-careful not to touch the more flimsy parts.

Loona smiles a little before looking around, taking it all in as a gentle gust of wind blew through the trees. A few cars passed on the highway and a few of the locals strolled past as an awkward silence fell between Loona and Octavia who was fixing up her black jacket. Suddenly, a random idea for a topic popped into her head:

“Oh! Hey Via? Ever heard of cryptids?”

“Cryptids?” Octavia didn’t quite know what her “big sister” meant.

“You know, uh.. strange creatures or phenomena that can’t be explained, like folklore,” Loona goes on to elaborate.

“…Oh? Oh! Yeah, I’ve heard of them; why, what about it,” Octavia inquires, interested in where this would lead to.

Loona shrugs; “Eh, nothing much, I just like reading about them. Like, take for example ‘the mothman’ some people said they saw in some country town in America a while ago.”

“The… mothman?” Octavia was quickly becoming intrigued.

“Yeah, some country yokels who said they saw a humanoid that looked like a moth. It’s that semblance of mystery which I really fucking love - like, what if it exists? What if they’re full of shit? We’ll never know,” Loona enthusiastically explains.

“Huh… wait, hang on, what about us? Surely we’re “cryptids” to people here,” Octavia points out.

“Hah- yeah, in a way we are,” Loona considers; “But we’re disguised at the moment so they don’t know. Difference between us and ‘cryptids’ is the idea of the unknown; it’s more the possibility of what if there’s more to Earth than what we know? That’s what keeps me hooked.”

Octavia raises her brow in consideration, finding the topic oddly interesting. She listens in as Loona goes on a mildly passionate rant on what humans had seen with regards to stories of the unknown. One which did stand out to Octavia was that of “the stairs”, a phenomena where random hikers or park rangers would find a random set of stairs in the middle of the forest where they obviously shouldn’t be. Now, to be fair, this one was a little more far-fetched compared to the others, but it nonetheless sent Octavia’s imagination running.

Loona pipes down a little bit as she concludes her little passionate ranting, choosing to shift in her seat to make herself more comfortable, all sprawled out along the benches with an overall feel of comfort. The hellhound in her human disguise takes in her surroundings, looking around casually with an indifferent demeanor until she looks back towards the direction of the gas station. She freezes, her gaze seemingly fixated at something or someone within the building.

Octavia notices this sudden alertness from the “human” as she becomes mildly confused; “What’s wrong?”

“I think we may have trouble…”

Octavia blinks a little; “Wh-What? Why?”

“Just play it cool, maybe they won’t notice us,” Loona bluntly replies as she turns away from the direction of the gas station, choosing to face Octavia’s location directly with her face away from the general line of sight.

“Who’s ‘they,’” Octavia nervously asks as she peers towards the gas station building for a quick moment.

“It’s the rest of that group I had that fight with, I’m just worried they’ll see us and try to fuck with us,” Loona explains in a quieter tone.

“Oh shit…” Octavia whispers harshly, tugging her beanie over her head a little bit more in nervousness, acquiring a nervous fidget.

Loona’s worst fears came to be as the group of two young men exited the building and appeared to look towards the general direction of the picnic table they sat in. Nervously, Octavia’s eyes shift

towards the pair in the distance as one of the young louts pointed to her location. This caused her to whimper a little in fear for what they would do to them, only to then be hushed gently by Loona; “Stay calm, Via, you’re with me,” the “human” assures as the pair in the distance begins to make their way over.

It felt like a torturous eternity, but after much unwelcome anticipation, the small pair of two approached the picnic table and stood over the both of them. Octavia looked down at the box she had with her, practically sweating bullets as one of them, the taller young man with long brown hair, began to speak; “What are you two doing here, Ey?”

“Nothing,” Loona bluntly replies as she sits with her hands held together on top of the table itself.

“That’s nice,” the young lout smirks as he slowly leans on the picnic table itself, both his hands flat on its hardwood surface; “You going to apologize?”

Loona sniffs and shifts her blank gaze at the young man standing over her; “For what?”

The young man scoffs; “For not knowing your place, luvvy. Fuck, you are a dumb bitch, aren’t you?”

Loona shrugs a little, feeling her temper begin to rise; “Call me what you like, I couldn’t give less of a fuck.”

“Ah yeah,” the other young lout interjects as he slowly approaches Octavia who was visibly concerned; “Then whose this little runt here?”

“Don’t you dare,” Loona quietly growls, her tone becoming that slightly more stern.

“Oooh- hohoho! Don’t I dare~? What was I going to do, hey?”

Loona’s now harsh and piercing gaze shoots up at the young man next to Octavia who was obviously trying to act intimidating; “I said don’t you fucking dare.”

“What’s going on here, boys?” Suddenly, a familiar booming voice calls out from behind the ringleader, slowly approaching over to the duo of troublemakers. It was Jim, walking over from his Ute with his hands in his trouser pockets.

“None of your concern, ya dog,” the ringleader of the group calls out after turning around, noticing that the man in the red shirt was a good five extra inches in height compared to himself.

“Yeah, nah, I think it is my concern, fuckarse. What are two doing anyway, going after a pair of women like two little perverts,” Jim retorts immediately as he flexes his fingers, allowing his knuckles to crackle.

“Why don’t you fuck off, ya dog cunt,” the young man standing next to Octavia blurts out.

“Can’t do that, sorry,” Jim bluntly says with a stern look in his eyes; “We don’t want a scrap here, do we? Over what?”

“Over this little bitch,” the long-haired lout refutes as he begins getting into Jim’s face; “What the fuck are you going to do about it?”

“Want to find out,” Jim leans in slightly, his voice growling a little bit in a tone that genuinely surprised Loona; never before had she heard his voice become so audibly intimidating.

The ringleader is taken aback, hesitating on whether or not the next move should be made. Perhaps quite sensibly, he backs off to rejoin his other friend who was glaring at Jim in what was pretty much a stand-off.

Jim continues to stand his ground as he glares at the pair of young men still practically towering over Octavia; “You want to step away from the girl?”

With a smirk stained on his lips, the long-haired young man turns his head towards Octavia in a cocky manner; “Uhh.. nah, I don’t think I want-”

Suddenly, Loona shoots up from across her seat and grabs the young man firmly from under his neck, her grip firm and uncompromising! She stares into his startled eyes and with beared-gritted teeth and a petrifying, ferocious sneer; “We’re not fucking asking, we’re telling!”

Without much warning, the ringleader tries to swing at Loona which obviously doesn’t end too well for him as he is then tackled to the ground with a loud “thud”! The other young man in the group tries to go after Loona but is blocked by Jim who grabs him with a firm, uncompromising grip by the scruff of his neck! Octavia had inched away from the altercation unfolding while protecting the taxidermy in her grasp, and while she was still startled by the sudden altercation, she had confidence by that point that she had two body-guards protecting her from much harm.

“GET OFF ME, CUNT,” the long-haired lout whines as his right arm is pinned firmly behind his back by Loona, though she was having absolutely none of it.

She then smacks the sentient human garbage across the back of his head, causing him to cry out in more pain from the gunshot-loud slap he had just received to the side of his head which made his ears ring; “Oh for fuck sakes, will you ever learn to shut the fuck up!?”

“CHRIST, just- agh, let us go and we’ll leave you alone,” Jim’s own captive finally pleads as he helplessly watches his own mate being humiliated by Loona in the dirt.

“Will you, now? No more confrontations? Because it’s pretty obvious you can’t even fight a woman, pathetically enough,” Jim smirks as he tightens his grip from behind the young lout’s neck, causing him to wince more in pain.

“No more, we promise! Fuck- just let us go, you’re going to break his arm!”

“Hah! You say that as if I’d suddenly give a shit, pin-dick,” Loona chuckles with a wide smirk as she tugs the ringleader’s arm behind his back more, enjoying hearing him whimper and plead like the pathetic urchin that he was.

Jim chuckles at this as he shakes his head; “I think he’s been beaten enough, matey. I reckon he’s gotten the message now.”

Loona hesitates for a moment as she wanted to keep going with the pathetic human waste she was humiliating before she finally lets the loutish ringleader go before stepping away from him; “You two are very fucking lucky that this guy’s here to be the ‘voice of reason’,” Loona warns bluntly as she referred to Jim who had just let go of his own captive’s neck.

After a bit of a dazed struggle, the bruised and humiliated ringleader coughs up spit as he stands up, his nose bleeding down to the top of his upper lip and his clothes in a mess; Loona had really beaten him hard it seemed. He glares intently at Loona as he limps back towards the gas station with his accompanying associate, pointing at Loona as they retreat further away; “We’ll get you on your knees soon enough, bitch!”

“Go sit on a huge dick, you bitch-boy,” Loona calls out in return with a satisfied and wide smirk painted on her face. After calming herself down, she turns to Octavia who was looking on in surprise at what had just occurred; “You okay, Via?”

“Y-Yeah, I’m okay. Thanks for protecting me, both of you,” Via expresses her thanks as she breathes a sigh of relief. Out of caution, she opens the box to check if her taxidermy statue had been damaged in any way, only to discover that it hadn’t to her relief.

“Hey, don’t mention it,” Loona sincerely smiles as she gently holds Octavia’s shoulder to calm her down; “That shit hasn’t ruined your day, has it?”

Octavia shakes her head with a reassuring smile; “No, I don’t think so; it’s just an unlucky fluke, those fucking arseholes. You think they’ll come back?”

Loona snickers with a smile of intent at the thought of getting stuck back into both of them; “Not if I have to say anything about it. Watch me, I’ll probably gut them alive like the useless sack-of-shit oxygen-thieves they are.”

“Nah, I don’t think you need to go that far,” Jim interjects with a snicker as he kicks the dirt where the ringleader’s spit had accumulated from his time on the ground at Loona’s minimal mercy.

“Pffft- whatever you say,” Loona concedes as she turns back towards Octavia who had gotten up from her seat with the box firmly in her grasp; “Did you feel like doing anything else here, V?”

“Mmm… no, I think I’m good to head back; I want to keep this safe, you know,” Octavia replies as she gestures to the box in her hands.

Loona in endearment pats her smaller, shy friend’s beanie, ruffling it a little as she half-smiles; “Heh- you’re the boss,” she teases as Jim leads them back to his Ute.

“What? Who said that I’m the boss,” Octavia asks with a snicker escaping her mouth.

“I did! You’re my boss, I’m your sidekick, and Jim over here is our glorified taxi driver or our servant,” Loona explains as she gives a smug and teasing grin towards Jim, who merely grunts in response with a defeated grin as he climbs back into the driver's seat.

Octavia huffs a little as she gets in the passenger’s seat after Loona squeezes herself comfortably inside in the middle space. Octavia sat comfortably by the window with the hardwood parcel in her lap, being ever-so-careful not to knock it around, perhaps treating this newly acquired statue like her pet. Loona, meanwhile, goes about closing her eyes as she folds her arms to have a nap, feeling herself slowly doze off as they make the trip home. Just as the hellhound is about to nod completely off, her phone begins buzzing from within her jacket’s pocket, jolting her completely awake.

Loona groans as she automatically slips the phone out of her pocket and answers the phone without looking, assuming it to be a call from Blitz; “Yes, Blitz, what’s up now?”

“Is my name “Blitz” now, is it,” a masculine voice answers from the other end with a snicker.

Loona’s eyes widen suddenly as she recognises the voice almost immediately; “What the f- Tex!”

The voice at the other end of the line laughs at this sudden reaction which had also caught the driver of the vehicle off guard for a moment; “Hey, great to hear from you, too! How’s things been?”

“Eheh, i-it’s been great, thank you,” Loona stutters with a bashful grin on her face, the mere sound of Vortex’s voice enough to send her into a flustered downward spiral of excitable emotions.

“Great to hear, L. Are you up to anything at the moment?”

“Oh, I’m down for literally anything you give me, big guy,” Loona accidentally lets slip without realizing that she was quickly losing her composure.

“What was that?”

This snaps the clearly flustered Loona back to reality as she clears her throat and calms down, Octavia looking on with mild confusion; “Oh shi- N-nothing, don’t worry about it. So yeah, uh, w-what’s up, Tex?”

Vortex snickers a little from the other end of the line; “Sorry, I won’t waste your time; are you up to join us at a party tomorrow? It’s at the usual place.”

“O-oh! Sure! Oh wait, shit.. I’m not sure if I can, Tex, sorry,” Loona concedes with a slightly disappointed tone of voice.

“Aw, really? Why’s that, L?”

“Ah, just out with some other friends, we’re out on a short holiday to get away from it all, yanno. We’ll be back in a day or two though,” Loona explains as she looks at Octavia with a small smile, to which the owlet smiles in return.

“Huh, cool,” Vortex acknowledges; “Where are you, did you say?”

“I- uhh…” Loona stagnates a little, not necessarily sure if she should tell him where she really was; “We’re just over at this little.. r-resort together.”

“A resort?”

“Y-yeah! Just chilling out and doing stuff together, you know what I mean,” Loona half-nervously tries to play it off, hoping that she’d sound convincing enough.

Vortex didn't seem entirely convinced; "Huh, okay. Hey, look, we have another party in about three days from now if you'd like to come to that one instead. It'll be much smaller though, just a group of close friends of mine."

"Oh! I mean, s-sure, I'll be there for that one," Loona perks up after hearing this; "I'll see you there, yeah?"

"Oh for sure," Vortex chuckles from the other end of the line; "Talk to you later, L. Make sure to be there!"

"See you, Tex," Loona concludes as she hangs up the phone while still recovering from her flustered and bashful reaction a minute ago.

"Who was that," Jim asked with curiosity as he looked to the road ahead.

"Nobody, just a guy that I know," Loona quickly replies, still blushing slightly from the mere thought of the larger hellhound, his huge frame practically towering over her whenever they stood mere inches away.

"Ah yeah? For a nobody you seemed very bashful about talking with him," Jim points out, Octavia nodding slightly in agreement to this observation.

"What? N-no I wasn't," Loona is quick to refute, obviously trying to deny it as best she could.

"Yeah you were, matey! I saw and heard you stuttering there," Jim teased with a knowing grin.

"Oh shut it, you huge pain in the ass," Loona bashfully retorts as she slumps into her chair, practically overcome with thoughts about Vortex which usually tended to happen on the odd occasion.

A Pair of Star Gazers

After roughly a quiet half-an-hour's drive back, Loona, Octavia, and their so flatteringly described "servant", Jim, had at last arrived back home where the owlet stored her newly acquired display, opting to keep it temporarily in one of the display cabinets with the homeowner's express permission. Jim takes the time to carefully examine this intriguing bit of art, the seemingly "alive" nature of this statue catching his attention, fascinating him as if it was some otherworldly specimen. Loona and Octavia, who both had since turned back into their true forms, take this bit of downtime to learn about each other further, the owlet quite fascinated at the things the hellhound had to say.

"So he was some sort of… clown? A performer," Octavia asks with regards to the topic of Blitz's past career before he became what is essentially a mercenary.

"Yup, at least judging by the posters he has in his office," Loona emphasized as she dusted off her camouflage pants from some dust which had settled on them; "Used to work for his dad's old circus as a clown, at least from what I've heard from the few times he's ever talked about it. I don't bring it up, though; his time there wasn't… nice, let's just say that. It's not surprising to me at all that he practically burnt Loo Loo Land to the ground, either."

"Wooo, such a massive loss," Octavia sarcastically snickers as she relaxes on the couch, looking towards Loona who was sitting on the lounge chair with her full attention.

"Hah! I know, right? What about your dad, what does he do? I've only really met him once, and that was when we were trying to find you," Loona asks, giving Octavia an opportunity to open up.

Octavia's mind shifts immediately to her father; "M-my dad? When he's not running off somewhere to some garden party or his plants, he watches the stars."

Loona's brow raises with a hint of curiosity; "The stars?"

Octavia nods shyly; "Y-yeah, the stars. It's not an exciting job, really, but he does it anyway. I think there's a technical word for what he does."

"Astrology," Loona suggests.

Octavia clicks her fingers a little and points to Loona; “Yeah, that’s it. I guess I inherited his interest in stars, too; probably one of the better things I inherited,” Octavia quips with a slight chuckle.

“What’s this about astrology,” Jim butts in as he comes into the living room from the hallway, hanging up his akubra hat on the hatstand.

“Oh, nothing, just talking about how Via likes gazing at stars,” Loona informs as she gestures to the owl to the right of her.

“Ah, true. Well, as I said earlier, Octavia, you’ll love it tonight. There’s hardly any light pollution out here so you’ll have a great look at all of it,” Jim informs as he goes to the kitchen to fetch himself something to drink.

“Huh… is that so,” Octavia shyly replies as she looks at Jim, still trying to get used to rather tall presence.

“For sure! Hey, if you’re interested for later, there’s a trail through the bushland that takes you out to this clearing, it overlooks a bit of a ravine which hangs over this river not too far from here. The entrance to it is just down the road, off towards the south,” Jim goes on to explain as he sips a glass of water he had poured himself.

“Hm. Okay, noted,” Octavia considered as she took off her black jacket, having grown a little tired of wearing it.

“Are you going to tag along with us there,” Loona inquires as she crosses her legs, practically melting into her chair to relax a little.

“Nah, I don’t think so,” Jim concedes; “I’ll let you two talk and hang out in peace without my presence.”

“Alright, suit yourself. If anything goes wrong, though, you better come through the dark and save our asses,” Loona lightly jokes as she yawns a little, wanting to doze off for a moment.

“It’s already pretty much my obligation to save your arse, matey, I’ve done it once before,” Jim chuckles with a short and hearty laugh.

Octavia looks a little bit worried towards Loona; “N-nothings going to happen to us, right?”

“No no, I’m only joking around, Via, don’t worry about it,” Loona reassured with a kind smile; “Sorry for freaking you out.”

“Hehe- don’t worry, you didn’t,” Octavia reassures with a small smile as she fixes her beanie up a little.

“If you two want me, I’ll be outside,” Jim announces as he begins to leave the room to sit out on the veranda for the moment.

“W-wait a minute, don’t leave us,” Octavia suddenly blurts out to her own surprise.

Jim turns around for a moment, his eyebrow raised ever-so-slightly; “Why’s that?”

Octavia hesitates for a moment, hoping that she wasn’t sounding or being too demanding. After a few seconds, she works up the courage to speak to the young man once more; “I- uh.. I want you to stay with us a little, but only if that’s okay with you. I-I haven’t properly talked to you yet. Loona’s been carrying the conversations so far, after all.”

“Alrighty,” Jim nods as he makes his way to the free lounge chair, sitting down while propping one leg up onto his opposite knee; “What did you want to talk about?”

“Uh.. I’m not sure. I suppose I wanted to learn a little about you?”

Jim chuckles a little bit to himself; “What’s so fascinating about me, hey? Not sure if there’s anything too exciting for you to know.”

“Never said it had to be exciting,” Octavia explains; “I’m not that exciting, either. You’re new to me and so is this place, so educate me.”

Jim raises his brow a little bit as he makes himself comfortable in his seat; “You sure? I, uh, I don’t wanna bore you-”

“Can you stop depreciating yourself, dude,” Loona interrupts as she looks up from her phone; “If you can make me interested with your mundane-as-fuck life, which is a good thing by the way, you definitely can do the same with Via.”

Jim puts his hand up in capitulation and a snicker; “Pffft- alright, I give. Uhh, fucken- what can I talk about? Uhh… oh! You like firearms, Octavia?”

“Not really,” Octavia concedes with a shrug, intrigued to learn more about his human before her.

“Ah, shit, this is a good start,” Jim admits as he looks down in thought on what to say next; “You, uh… you interested in learning about them?”

“I suppose,” the owlet considers after a few seconds of considering the proposal; “What’s there to know?”

“Ah, matey, let me tell you, there’s heaps to know; how to handle them, how to fire them, how to maintain them. I could be here all day explaining the ins-and-outs!”

“Huh, cool…,” Octavia simply replies as she takes the information in; “W-what’s that one you got in that cabinet?”

“We call that an Enfield,” Jim goes on to lecture; “Ex-Military Grade stuff, it will pierce practically anything you fire with it - I mean, that’s how guns are supposed to work in the first place. If you’d like, I could give you a live demonstration.”

Octavia raises her brow slightly in mild curiosity; “What, firing it?”

“Sure! Just out the back of the house here, I got a crate and a few targets I could shoot at for you. What do you say, wanna check it out at all?”

Octavia shrugs a little bit, watching as Loona begins to zone out on her phone; “I mean, I don’t see why not. Are you coming to watch this, Loona?”

Loona quickly turns her attention from her phone, turning it off before slipping it back into her jacket’s pocket; “Eh, probably not, kinda want to just sit here and doze off. Do you want me to come around?”

“No, I’ll be okay,” Octavia assures Loona with a small smile before getting up from the couch and stretching a little.

Loona smiles back as she sinks further back into the considerably comfortable seat; “Sure thing. If there’s anything you need, though, don’t be scared to come wake me up.”

Octavia nods with a small smile as she follows Jim who was heading to his cabinet to retrieve his rifle and some ammunition. She watches as he holsters the weapon over his shoulder with the dark leather sling which was attached to it from underneath the length of the barrel. Feeling a little bad for Jim for having to carry everything, she decided to interrupt him politely; “Do, uh, do you need me to carry any of that for you?”

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” Jim reassures as he slots a few rounds of ammunition clips into the breast pockets of his shirt.

Octavia, despite his insistence, wasn’t entirely convinced; “You sure? I don’t want to appear useless when I can help.”

“Useless? Who said you’re being useless?”

Octavia rubs her forearm in a shy fashion as she shrugs; “Nobody is, I-I just want to help out, you know?”

“Yeah, nah, I get what you mean, and hey, I appreciate it. If you insist, I’ll get you to carry these extra clips,” Jim suggests as he hands Octavia the extra couple of rounds, which the owlet obliges by carrying the extra bullets in her grasp.

Before they finally made their way outside, Jim made sure to check off a list of things that he could’ve possibly forgotten about, before at last confirming that he had everything he needed. After confirming such, he waves Octavia to follow him around the back of his home, but not before stopping short of the entrance door and turning back towards the living room; “Oi, Loona!”

Loona grunts after presumably dozing off from within “her” chair, the yelling interrupting her lazy slumber; “Yeah, what is it!”

“If you hear any sudden gunshots, don’t worry about it and keep snoring!”

“As if I’ll care in the first place, I sleep through anything,” Loona huffs and calls out in return, feeling herself beginning to nod off again; “Now quit talking to me and let me sleep.”

Jim obliges by letting Loona have the last word in the conversation, quietly shutting the door behind him after letting Octavia out as well. He leads the owlet around the back of the house, slowly walking along as they take in the gentle breeze which had momentarily made itself known. As much as Octavia liked the silence, she felt that there needed to be a bit of conversation, considering that it seemed almost rude to practically “ignore” someone who’s voluntarily given herself and her friend a place to stay. With this in mind, the owlet begins to speak; “So, uh… Jim? Can I ask you something?”

Jim tilts his head in curiosity as they finally reach the far end of the house, finding a small stack of timber crates sitting away from the wall, and next to the crates was a small steel box of makeshift targets; “I don’t see why not. What’s on your mind?”

“I’ve noticed that you’re not, you know.. terrified of us. Why’s that? Not to sound rude or anything, just curious,” Octavia finally questions as she sets down the clips of ammunition on one of the timber crates according to the young man’s instruction.

Jim freezes for a moment, standing still and thinking on this rather reasonable question. Why wasn’t he terrified of this humanoid being and her humanoid wolf-like friend who was presumably

snoring away within the comfort of his living room? He huffs for a minute and shakes his head before conceding; “I’m not too sure, to be completely honest with you. I think part of it is because I had to practically live with Loona for an entire week, and let me tell you, from a mere man's perspective, she’s terrifying enough. After a while, I became convinced that she wasn’t going to do anything to me when she clearly had the chance.”

Octavia hums in acknowledgement as she leans up on the side of the house and pulls the beanie away from her inquisitive eyes; “Huh… is that so?”

“Pretty much,” Jim chuckles slightly as he casually loads a few rounds into his rifle’s chamber before sliding the bolt back in place; “I mean, having voluntarily accommodated someone who’s got the temper of a lion with a fuse waxed with petrol tends to exercise your courage.”

“Hey! I heard that,” Loona suddenly calls out from within the living room in testimony to her remarkable hearing, the dozy hellhound’s muffled voice reverberating from behind the timber and hardwood walls.

“Oh, that I’m certain of,” Jim calls back in return with a wheezing chuckle before waving Octavia over; “Now! Ready for the live demonstration?”

“I guess so,” Octavia simply replies with a shrug as she crosses her arms together, looking on as Jim begins to give her a lecture-esque rundown on how to aim a rifle, where to place the stock relative to your shoulder, basic safety tips such as always breath out when you fire, as well as a short yet extensive rundown on the use of the rifle firmly grasped in his hands. The owlet had to admit to herself, although it seemed all too much for her to understand entirely, at least it was something remotely interesting.

“Right! So, watch this, yeah? Keep in mind, the absolute sheer force of these rounds usually goes right through the skulls of wild boars,” Jim lightly boasts as he begins to aim the rifle, slowly raising the stock up to his right shoulder and tilting his head to eye-down the sights as well as his target at the same time. There is a long, drawn out silence until the young marksman pulls the trigger, the sudden loud “CRACK!” of the bullet exiting the barrel frightening Octavia for a split second as she observes with startled eyes one of the targets, an old beer bottle, completely evaporating before them!

Octavia calms herself down a little bit from the sudden noise which had filled their surroundings; “Shit!”

Jim raises his brow with a satisfied grin; “See what I mean? Tears through bloody everything, this thing does!”

“No kidding,” Octavia exclaims as she tries to find at least a few remnants of the target but to no avail; “Isn’t it a bit of overkill to use something like that against wild hogs?”

Jim considers this notion for a moment, before coming to his conclusion as he slides the bolt to discard the used round, the brass casing falling to the ground with a quiet metallic clinking; “I don’t think so. I’ve tried other calibers and other rifles before and trust me when I say that they don’t work as well. Either you end up shooting them but it doesn’t kill them right away or you pump a few rounds into them and they stay standing, and the last thing you want is a big fuck-off angry boar coming after you with what is essentially a pea shooter.”

“Huh…” Octavia hums as she slowly nods, somewhat getting what he was saying. Suddenly a thought came into her head which caught her attention, prompting the owlet to ask her next question; “Oh hey, you wouldn’t mind if I had a go at firing it?”

Jim turns his head towards Octavia, seriously considering giving her a go, though at the same time wondering if the recoil would be too much to handle; “You sure? The Enfield’s got a horrible kickback if you don’t hold it firmly, take it from me; I’ve had it almost dislocate my shoulder.”

“I think I’ll be okay,” Octavia reassures as she examines the rifle by Jim’s side, trying to look for a bit of adrenaline rush; “Just show me how to hold it and all that, then let me do the rest. Might as well try it once.”

“Alright, if you want to try,” the young man conceded as he hands the rifle to her, gesturing for her to come over to where he was standing; “Right, so rest the stock just between your collar bone and your shoulder, but don’t rest it where they join - that’s an instant fracture if you do.”

“Uhh, okay.” Octavia proceeds to hold the rifle up to her shoulder in a slightly awkward fashion, trying to get used to the weight of the firearm; “So, like this?”

“Just a little adjustment and you’ll be fine,” Jim corrects as he helps straighten the rifle within her grasp; “Like that! Now, grip onto it tightly and aim at that glass jar over there. Best thing to do is to not focus on either the sight or the target itself, but to have it so that you’re looking at both at the

same time. Once you're ready to fire, pull the trigger after you breathe out so you won't have the wind knocked out of you."

"Alright, I-I think I got it," Octavia huffs with a hint of nervousness, trying to focus so that she wouldn't hurt herself. She kept telling herself, despite her doubts, that she would be able to do this, to do something new on her own. It wouldn't be that bad, would it? After breathing in and out for a few seconds and at last reaching a steady and slow exhale, the trainee marksman decides to make her move.

"BANG!"

The sudden sheer and unexpected force of the recoil sends Octavia stumbling a couple of steps back before she finally regains her footing, looking over to her target to see if she had managed to evaporate it. She is slightly disappointed to find that it stood without even a small scratch, gleaming in the sunlight as if it was taunting her personally.

"Oh shit!," Jim exclaims suddenly; "Are you alright there?"

Octavia winces as her ears faintly ring from the sudden thunderous crack which filled the air: "Agh! Fuck! Y-ye-yeah.. Hah- yeah, I'm okay.. I'm okay. Dammit, I missed the shot though."

"Nah, don't worry about it! It's your first time, at least from what I know," Jim affirms kindly as he slides the bolt for Octavia to discard the empty cartridge; "Wanna try that again?"

"Y-yeah, sure," Octavia accepts as she is handed the rifle back. Unlike her last attempt mere moments ago, the trainee marksman holds the rifle more sturdily and places her feet further apart to give her a better center of balance; "Okay, here goes nothing."

…

Loona groggily awakens from her brief nap as she continues to hear the rifle being fired from behind the house. Although it was only a short and slightly interrupted nap, the hellhound felt that little bit more refreshed; it was practically unbelievable how she was able to sleep through such

loud and thunderous noises when the average person would wince in fright. From within the comfort of the living room, Loona could hear Octavia rejoice at the fact that she had finally hit her target, at least from what she could hear. She quietly smiles to herself, glad to hear Octavia happy as she checks her phone for any new notifications, only to find that the time was now 5:41 in the afternoon along with the usual spam notifications from social media.

As Loona scrolls through her phone with her scarlet eyes staring blankly at the screen, a sudden thought enters into her head regarding Octavia's earlier wish to attend a party with her. She momentarily freezes to think on the proposal; although she wanted to see Octavia happy and experience something new in accordance to her willing to do so, Loona wanted her to be completely safe at the same time. What if someone tried something dubious on her friend? What if she ended up not liking it and getting uncomfortable with the nature of some of the gatherings? That's when an idea hit her; Vortex. The small gathering with some of his closest friends which Loona said she would attend would probably be much better suited for Octavia, definitely much more tame compared to the usual crowds. Vortex was a much calmer type of hellhound, anyway; surely his friends and himself would welcome a new guest and could definitely be trusted to not act like a bunch of idiots?

Loona ultimately decides that it would be worth the try and goes on to send Vortex a brief text: "Hey Tex. Can I ask you something?"

She puts her phone down briefly after sending the message, waiting for a response as she rubs the sleep from her eyes, another gunshot being heard from around the other side of the house and the faint sound of a glass bottle shattering. She didn't have to wait long for a response as her phone gave off a "Ping!", making her heart skip a beat for a little; Loona wondered if she'll ever get over her slightly "secret" feelings for her "former" crush.

She looks down at her phone to read the message: "Ofc L, what's up?"

Loona gives off a small sigh as she types her response and sends it immediately: "Got a friend of mine who wants to try going out to a party. You think I could bring her along with me?"

A couple of seconds of waiting later, a response to her question is received: "Sure you can! We'll welcome her."

Loona smiles a little, her tail wagging ever-so-slightly as she quickly types her response: "Tysm Tex. I'll see you in a few days."

Shortly after sending this message, Vortex responds with a simple “thumbs up” before Loona puts down her phone, deciding to get up and take a sip of water from the kitchen. She drinks her tall glass of surprisingly ice-cold water as she looks off into the horizon, the sun beginning to get off into the west, a large patch of cloud-cover producing mesmerizing rays of light which Loona could swear she could just stare off at for hours. Not before long, she hears the familiar footsteps of both Jim and Octavia wandering in from outside, hearing as the young man opened the timber display cabinet to store his rifle away, while Octavia went straight past to the living room to find Loona standing by the kitchen counter.

“How’d it go,” Loona asks as she yawns, still trying to wake up from her short sleep.

“Can’t complain,” Octavia lightly smiles as she comes over with a light spring in her step; “Can you believe that I actually SHOT something?”

“No kidding,” Loona humors her newfound companion with a smirk; “Did Jim teach you?”

“He tried to at least,” the owlet snickers; “But it was fun! You should’ve been there to watch.”

“Aw, well now you’re making me feel bad, Via,” Loona teases lightly as she pats Octavia lightly on the back; “Oh, hey, I gotta tell you something I did while you were busy out there.”

Octavia looks at the hellhound with her attention fully on her; “Hm?”

“Remember how while we were driving back here, a friend gave me a call to invite me to a party? I’ve decided that I’m going to take you along with me. It’s not the big one, just another much smaller party in the next couple of days with some closer friends of this guy I know; ‘Tex. I’ve told him that you’ll be coming, so don’t fret about being uninvited,” Loona goes on to explain.

The owlet’s eyes widened with anticipation, a bright glimmer in her eyes a testimony to her sudden rush of excitement; “Really? A-are you serious!?”

Loona couldn’t help but snicker at her newfound friend who was practically glowing with excitement. There was something about the way that Octavia reacted to the news which endeared

her to this usually recluse teenager; “Yup! Don’t worry, I’m not bullshitting you. Just be warned though, ‘Tex is absolutely massive but very approachable and laid back, so you don’t need to be frightened of him; Just letting you know now so you know what to expect.”

Octavia was practically speechless, her mouth slightly agape as she stood before the hellhound who had practically taken her under her “wing”. At long last she had found a friend who seemed to truly care for what she wanted, something which she had unfortunately never experienced before. A broad-stretching smile appears on her face as slight tears of joy begin to prick up in the corner of her eyes; “I… I don’t know what to say, Loona, I… t-thank you.. thank you so much.”

The hellhound couldn’t help but chuckle at Via’s sheer barely contained excitement: “Hey hey, don’t mention it! Besides, gotta have someone to go with and keep me company.”

Octavia takes a short moment to compose herself, clearing her throat from becoming all teary; “Right, so uh, h-how do I prepare for stuff like this, like, do I need to bring anything with me?”

Loona shrugs a little; “Pfft- no, it’s not something you HAVE to do but it’s the thought that counts, I guess. People do appreciate stuff like that and it gives off the feeling that you’re invested in the party, but it’s entirely up to you,” she goes on to explain as if she was a lecturer, invested in her “field” of having a good time.

“Hm. I may or may not have some wine that dad wouldn’t “mind” me sneaking out,” Octavia humorously quips, a mischievous grin appearing on her face.

Loona found this little quip from the owlet surprising yet hilarious; “Damn, Via! Already up to the “thinking about sneaking alcohol out” stage, are you? Looks like we got ourselves a newfound rebel here!”

“I’ve only learnt from the best,” Octavia suddenly pokes back with a mischievous grin painted on her face which surprised Loona.

This quip back sent the hellhound cackling, finding it oddly hilarious; “Hey! What’s that supposed to mean??”

“Oh come on, it’s not like it’s a secret; you were boasting about how you’ve done that with your dad’s beer before we arrived,” Octavia laughs, her mood obviously greatly improved from the incidents earlier on in the day.

“Ahah, yeah I was, wasn’t I,” Loona concedes with a snicker escaping through her entertained smirk.

“Don’t think about taking any of mine, before you even think of asking,” Jim interjects from outside, since retired to his lounge chair on the veranda.

“As if we were going to in the first place, dude! We’re not complete assholes,” Loona calls back with a smirk which was met with a small fit of laughter emanating from Octavia.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jim calls back in dismissal as he goes silent for a few seconds; “Ah, shit.”

Loona notices this sudden change in the young man’s tone, becoming slightly concerned as to what made him verbally react in this way; “What’s up?”

“I think you two may need to hide for now, someone’s coming up the path,” Jim calls out in a harsher yet quieter tone of voice, as if trying to make it less obvious to this approaching visitor that someone else was present in the house with him.

“W-what? No-no-no, oh shit, what are we gonna do,” Octavia winces in a hushed tone of voice with a hint of fear-induced anxiety, only to then be comforted by Loona who began to think of their options.

“Don’t panic, we’ll hide somewhere. Uhh- oh! Over here,” Loona instructs the nervous owlet as they quickly retreat to the spare bedroom for the time being. As silent and swift as they could, Loona rushes Octavia into the confines of the unsuspecting room before closing the door behind them, making sure to shut it gently just before it completely closes so as not to cause it to slam.

Octavia paces a little with her eyes shifting in thoughtful mild concern, trying to think of a possible way out if needs be; “Fuck, what are we gonna do? W-why don’t we shift to our human forms, wouldn’t that be much easier?”

“Oh shit, you’re right-,” Loona agrees but not before hearing the floorboards of the veranda creak with the sudden visitor’s footsteps and the sound of an unfamiliar male’s voice; “Nevermind, it’s too late for that. Shh- just keep quiet and we’ll be okay,” the hellhound silently instructs as she leans her ear up to the bedroom’s door, trying to eavesdrop into the conversation. Although it sounded muffled from behind the hardwood timber walls, Loona could make out snippets of the interaction being held outside:

“How’s the fiancé, Paul?”

“Ah, you know, Jim, she’s been alright considering the condition. Are you still seeing that Lorraine?”

“Lorraine? Not sure, haven’t seen her. Reckon she’s moved outta town.”

“What are they saying? Who is it,” Octavia asks anxiously, her tone of voice reduced to a mere whisper.

“Think it may be his brother,” Loona whispers back, still trying to carefully listen in and figure out what was happening.

“His ‘brother’?”

“Shh-, hang on, I think something’s happening,” Loona instructs again as she hears footsteps coming through the hallway, holding her breath for a few seconds as she hears them walk past the door and into the living room.

Meanwhile on the other side of the door, Jim was practically sweating bullets, trying his hardest with success so far to make out that he wasn’t hiding anything from his visiting next of kin. Jim’s brother, who looked almost identical to him except for a long scar across his left cheek, Paul, looked around his younger brother’s welcoming old house. He recognised the living room almost immediately from its very familiar layout as nothing of too much note had changed from the last time he had stepped foot into it.

“I see you haven’t done much to this place since I left, have ya,” Paul comments to Jim who was standing with his hands on his waist in the entrance to the hallway.

“N-nah, I haven’t,” Jim stutters a little through his slight nervousness, trying to make sure that his two other visitors were staying hidden.

“… You alright there, mate? You look anxious as all hell. What’s going on,” Paul inquires, growing confused at his younger brother’s odd anxious state.

“Nothing, just tired I suppose,” Jim decides to excuse himself as he tries with a bit more success to play the situation off. He inconspicuously darts his gaze once again back towards the spare bedroom, checking for a mere fraction of a second to see if where they were wasn’t too obvious.

“Righto,” Paul shrugs as he heads off to the kitchen to get himself something to drink, pouring himself a small shot of brandy his younger brother had on hand as he leans on the kitchen counter. As he downs his shot, Paul’s wandering casual gaze becomes fixated on something sitting neatly on the couch; “Whose is that?”

Jim’s eyes darted towards his brother with a miniature wave of panic; “What’s whose, sorry?”

“That over there, that bag,” Paul elaborates as he pointed over to the black bag that Loona had bought along with her which contained the grimoire, her only means of getting back home.

From within the confines of the spare bedroom, Loona’s eyes widen with sudden realization; she had left the fucking bag with the grimoire in it out in the living room. Out of all the things she could forget to hide, how the fuck did she forget arguably the most important thing she bought along?

“The bag’s out there??,” Octavia asks in a hushed raspy tone, the sudden feeling of dread almost overwhelming her.

“Oh shit, it is. Oh for fuck sakes. Hang on, just stay calm, I think he’s got this,” Loona replies with a raspy whisper as she feels herself becoming slightly anxious. She calms herself down a little to think clearly, her only hope at this point was betting on whether Jim could continue to play it cool and make something up on the spot that was remotely convincing:

“Oh, that bag? Just a bag I found.”

Loona hears Jim say from behind the door, making the hellhound wince and cover her eyes and forehead in defeat; “Really, Jim? “Just a bag you found?”,she thought to herself in an almost incredulous bewilderment. To give Jim credit where it was due, at least it was better than nothing at all.

“Yeah, right? Where’d you find it,” Paul asks in an almost interrogating manner.

“Ah just at some garage sale, thought I’d pick it up,” Jim makes up on the spot, seeming to successfully convince his old brother with his on-the-spot lies.

Paul nods his head and hums in acknowledgement before sighing and getting up from leaning on the kitchen bench; “Righto. Anyhow, sorry to come in at such short notice, I thought I’d stop by just to see how you’re going. I’ll be heading off tomorrow interstate for a job they got me assigned to, just some random fucknuckle logistics company based in Port Macquarie.”

“Ah yeah,” Jim acknowledges as he felt his nerves loosen up a little, at last convinced that he dodged a bullet; “What happened to that other job up near Toowoomba?”

Paul shakes his head as he thinks on the question, having to think back to his previous work, obviously frustrating him a considerable amount; “Ah, you know how it is, the contract fell through and they gave me a notice of termination, the fucken bastards.”

“So they laid you off,” Jim sighs in pity; “Of course they did. Anyhow, I guess I’ll see you off, hey?”

Paul nods as he begins to make his way out of the kitchen and into the hallway, standing directly adjacent to the spare bedroom’s door; “Yeah, nah, I think that’ll be it for me today. Good to see you again, Jimmy; I’ll call you in the next few da- … what was that?”

What “that" was came from inside Loona and Octavia’s hiding spot, where in an attempt to shift her position in order to crouch down more comfortably, Loona had accidentally bumped slightly louder

than expected into the door. This sudden clumsy move caused the hellhound to gasp and freeze where she stood, Octavia as well looking on with a look of “oh shit” plastered on her face. They both stand completely still within the darkened room, helplessly watching the door in the unwelcome anticipation that Jim’s older brother would investigate the source of the noise which at this point was absolutely inevitable. … After what felt like an eternity, however, that “inevitability” never came as he heard Paul dismiss the noise and say his farewells.

Jim closes the front door as Paul leaves his property to head back towards town, before then sighing heavily and leaning up against the adjacent wall, wiping the sweat from his brow as he did so; “Uff, fucking hell.. THAT was too damn close.”

Loona returns to the hallway from her hiding spot to find Jim, catching his breath in the aftermath of that sudden intense moment; it was obvious that he was practically sweating bullets, having to hide the fact that two other visitors were present from his brother no less; “Huh. You did well there, dude, thank fuck for that. You actually managed to keep your composure?”

“I wasn’t going to tell him that you two were here for obvious reasons, now was I,” Jim half-chuckles as he sighs once more, feeling his nerves at last relax properly.

Octavia comes back out a couple of seconds later after being convinced that the coast was clear once again, looking out towards the entrance only to see that the door had been closed to her greatest relief.

“Thanks for covering for us,” Octavia quietly thanked with most sincerity.

Jim nods in acknowledgement with a smile to the owlet’s thanks as he goes to rest outside on the balcony once more, hanging up his hat inside before finally making his way back outside to take in the cool, crisp air. The sun was at last setting over the horizon after another longer day for the trio as Octavia decides to retrieve her new black jacket and slips it back on, deciding that she wanted to check out the rumored scenic spot that the young man had told them about.

“Hey, Loona? Did you feel like finally going out to that spot? I wanna watch the sun set there,” Octavia asked politely to her newfound friend as she fixed up her feathers from under her beanie.

“Might as well, I suppose,” Loona agrees to the proposal as genuinely smiles before calling out to the ‘country yokel’ on the porch; “Hey, Jim, do you think you could be our escort?”

“And if I say no?”, the young man calls back in a joking manner as he heaves himself off his chair, heading inside to retrieve his hat for the umpteenth time that day.

“Then I’d have to.. I dunno, make your life hell, torture you or some shit, frame you for murder; I’ll think on it,” Loona answers back with a sarcastic smirk, bringing Octavia along with her outside to head out for that evening, as well bringing along, to both Jim and Octavia’s surprise, a small four-pack of beer which she presumably intended to consume at the lookout.

“Where did you get that from? Those aren’t one of mine, are they?,” Jim suddenly inquires with genuine curiosity.

Loona laughs at this sudden questioning as she nestles the carton behind her jacket, cradling it under her arm so it wouldn’t slip; “Hah! No, don’t panic, this isn’t any of yours! Picked this cheap crap up from somewhere earlier today before we came back.”

Jim inquisitively raises his brow as he leads his accompanying entourage down the gravel and dirt pathway towards the main road; “Legally?”

“I can neither confirm nor deny,” Loona is quick to remark with a wide, mischievous grin stretched across her face.

Jim groans in fear of what the true answer may be as he swiftly leads both hellhound and owlet across the road, into the thick of the bushland so as not to be seen if another vehicle passes by sooner rather than later. After checking that the coast was clear and that nobody had seen them, Jim waves both Loona and Octavia over to follow him through the scrub, coming across a well-established trail which peeked through the thickness of the surrounding tree cover. It appeared that the beginning to the trail itself was a good few hundred meters away in the opposite direction. Jim clears the low-hanging foliage for his accompanying guests and points towards where the path begins to incline; “Right, if you head through that way and keep walking for a good couple of minutes, you should come across the lookout point. It’s nothing much, just a timber platform with a bench and handrails, though you’ll see for yourselves that it’s a bloody gorgeous view.”

“We’ll have to take your word for it,” Loona nods along with Octavia close by her side; “You sure you don’t want to tag along with us?”

“I would, but I got some shit to do on the Ute back home, yanno? General maintenance for the old bastard and all that,” Jim explains with a sigh.

Loona hums a little to Jim’s explanation; “Hm. Alright, suit yourself. But again, if anything happens, you better come and rescue us,” she adds with a light smirk, following along with Octavia who surprisingly had taken charge, looking around this wild and wooded landscape as the owlet seemingly found herself getting lost within a world of her own. Loona watches in admiration of Octavia practically coming out her usual reclusive shell, practically getting lost in admiration of the woodland around them with her hands tucked into her jacket’s pockets. It was only when her friend catches up to walk alongside her when Via at last snaps out of it, though only for a moment.

“You’re loving it out here, arentcha,” Loona asks with a knowing look in her eyes.

“Just “Loving it?” That’s a bit of an understatement,” Octavia replied as she looked to the inclining path before her.

Loona, ultimately, was glad to hear this as they both could see the summit of this incline that they were halfway up at that point. Time seemed to have no meaning in this scene of pure tranquility, the sound of distant locusts buzzing in a collective group somewhere off into the distance, amongst the dense native foliage. The sound of the native birds periodically singing their bush songs up within the branches of the tall gumtrees and willows emanated with an echo. After a couple of minutes of silence and wandering along the winding trail, at last they arrived at the lookout which was, by the very definition, splendor. What the duo gazed at in awe was the surrounding vast ranges which encircled them, stretching on for miles and miles, large patches further off into the distance indicating the beginning of either farmland, other distant townships, or perhaps a mining operation. These factors didn’t impede on the pure natural splendor and beauty of this wild country with the growing orange hue of the sunset beginning to make itself known in the westerly direction. Loona observes it all with pleasant surprise; “Huh… he wasn’t kidding, this is neat.”

Octavia's eyes focus on the mesmerizing view as she sits down on the lonesome bench which faces outwards towards the mountain ranges. The scenery laid out over the land before her was something so familiar yet so different; instead of the towering skyscrapers of West-Coast America, there was a green and brown ocean of countless native trees and other assorted foliage, hidden away under a canopy of perhaps trillions of green leaves, all swaying with the gentle inertia of the wind. As she takes this all in with a whimsical feeling of awe, Octavia makes sure to move over for Loona to sit with her, along with a small bit of space for her crate of beer.

"Imagine…" Octavia quietly mumbles to herself, resting her chin into the palm of her hands.

"Imagine?" Loona butts in a little, cracking open one of the bottles with her teeth and taking a brief swig, savoring the taste of her (perhaps "generously donated") cheap drink.

Octavia snaps out of her whimsical state of mind and begins to elaborate on her thoughts; "Just imagine, what could be in all that… forest. What creatures, what undiscovered species which none of us will perhaps ever know even exists. It's all so… mysterious, yet attractive."

Loona snickers with admiration of her friend's seemingly wild imagination; "Wooo, look out! We got a poet over here!"

Octavia shakes her head a little and smiles; “Oh, I’m not THAT talented.”

The hellhound scoffs a little as she looks to the owlet sitting next to her; “What’s with everyone today and self-depreciating themselves? You know you’ve got talent, dude.”

“I’m not! I’m not, I promise,” Octavia smirks as she sighs, watching as the sky slowly begins to get darker and the last remnants of cloud-cover subsiding, drifting away to reveal the clear blue sky above them.

“Uh-huh, you better be, you dork,” Loona playfully jabs back as she takes another swig of her drink, wanting to conserve it for as long as possible; they still had an hour to go until the sun completely dipped over the horizon. As a bit of goodwill, Loona decides to grab a second beer before offering the unopened bottle to Octavia; “You wanna try one?”

Octavia looks down at the drink with her brow furrowed, examining the contents of the glass bottle with hesitation; “D-Do you think I should?”

“It’s completely up to you, Via; no peer pressure from me,” Loona assures her with a smile, obviously knowing that her friend was nervous about trying it.

“Mmm.. I mean- I want to try it, but… I don’t want it to do anything to me, you know?”

“It won’t do anything, it’s one of those low-strength beers, literally just a cider. There’s so little alcohol in it, it’s hardly funny,” Loona explains, gesturing to the label on the front.

Octavia’s eyes shift in debate with herself before finally making her decision; “Mmm… Okay, I’ll have one; but please don’t tell dad, okay?”

Loona cackles a bit as she opens the bottle with a hard twist, the contents of the bottle fizzing a little before it is handed to the owlet; “Your secret is safe with me, don’t fret.”

“Hahah, I trust you,” Octavia quietly replies as they both look out into the sky, two miniscule bright spots in the sky since appeared which indicate that night was almost upon them. Over the quiet next

ten minutes, both Loona and Octavia witness as the sky becomes illuminated with the spots of countless stars and distant galaxies, allowing them to be exposed to all of its mesmerizing nature without the inconvenience of light pollution.

Octavia's quiet tone suddenly interrupts the usual sounds of the Australian Wilderness as the very last remnants of daylight vanished to the west; "So, how did you find this place, again?"

Loona turns her head briefly towards her accompanying companion before she sighs and takes a swig of the bottle, which by that point was only one-quarter full; "Ah, look, it's a bit of a longish story. I'll tell you exactly as I told Jim, because fuck it, I might as well to pass the time; So there's this guy I have to tolerate and "work" with called "Moxxie"; most obnoxious little twerp you could ever meet. And so the day or so before we leave for the weekend, he complains to his wife, "Millie", about how I'm a "Drunken, Useless Layabout"."

Octavia becomes engaged in this retelling of Loona's ordeal; "Oh yeah?"

"Yup," Loona confirms; "And at exactly the same time as I walk back into the office as well! I heard it all, so I told the little dickweed straight; "Fuck you, Moxxie; I'll PROVE that you idiots need me!" And that's what I did; The night before the week began again, I grabbed the Grimoire and opened a portal to one of our jobs, which was a guy from here. I yelled out to dad that I was going to prove that I'm useful and capable, aaaand… I went through the portal WITHOUT the book and, well… I got stuck."

"Uff," Octavia reacts as she takes her first swig of her beer, finding the taste slightly bitter yet oddly enjoyable.

"Yup! I was in my human guise anyway, so getting caught wasn't the problem but on that day there was some sort of fucking mini heatwave, I kept walking through all these trees and shit. I eventually became thirsty, hot, and completely lost, and the last thing I remember before I collapsed into this ditch from heat-stress was seeing Jim's property and the dude himself working on his fence. He saw me, rushed on over to check on me without even knowing who I was, and… and he took me into town, and ended up saving me," Loona goes on to retell as she looks up into the star-scattered night sky above them, Octavia doing the same in reaction.

"Huh… And you two started getting along?"

“At first? Absolutely not,” Loona chuckles with a grin; “But after being stuck here for three days, I started realizing that maybe he was on my side; he kept giving me food, drink, some money to spend on this jacket I bought in town, even my own room, and to be frank, I was confused; “Why is this country yokel-looking motherfucker being so nice to me?” Up until that point, I… I never had someone, other than dad, being so generous with me without them having some sort of creepy ulterior motive, yanno what I mean?”

Octavia knew what Loona ultimately meant.

After clearing her throat for a bit, the hellhound continues; “And, like… I guess we became very unlikely friends from that point onward? That’s why we’re here today.”

“It’s good to have someone to watch out for you,” Octavia suggests as she takes another swig of her drink.

Loona nods her head in absolute agreement; “Oh, for sure! Which is why I’m here for you.”

Octavia smiles ever-so-slightly, glad to hear this as her mind trails off once more. Her demeanor becomes a little bit somber as she turns her gaze back up into the horizon, her mind seemingly once again plagued with concern and reservations. Loona notices this immediately and instinctively knows what to do from there, shifting in her seat to face Octavia properly; “Still thinking about your dad?”

Via wasn’t sure of how to respond in all honesty with herself. Did the thought of everything back at home have to return now out of all moments? Couldn’t it have returned when she was alone to her own devices? They had talked about this literally just hours before, surely there was no reason to think about it further; “... Don’t worry about it, Loona, it’s… it’s repetitive.”

Loona becomes slightly confused; “What is?”

“Just- talking about dad, okay?” Octavia admits with a frustrated huff; “It’s really not worth your time talking about it.”

This sudden confession takes Loona aback; “... Via… It is worth my time; you obviously want to.”

Octavia squirms on her side of the bench with a strained look in her eyes and begins to wrap her arms around herself; “But we’ve already talked about it, earlier today, I already know that we’ll find solutions together, what more do I need to prove to myself that I’ll be fine? You’ll get annoyed if I keep bringing up old topics.”

“Via-.”

The owlet begins to tear up a little at the sheer doubts that weighed on her so painfully; “Just- Don’t worry about it all, okay? I’ll be fine, I just need to shut the fuck up and put up with it.”

“Via, I-.”

“I just… I need to- I need to just suck it up-.”

“Octavia. Please, listen to me,” Loona firmly yet calmly speaks as her expression turns into one full of genuine seriousness, managing to snap her friend out of her troubled frame of mind for just a moment; “You don’t have to do this alone. I really couldn’t give less of a shit if I have to hear it a thousand times; if it’s on your mind and it bothers you, then you have to speak about it, okay? It’s not healthy keeping it to yourself.”

“I know… I know…” Octavia quietly admits as she looks back into the horizon with a deeply pensive state of mind.

“Then tell me, and you tell me as many times as you like. What’s on your mind?”

Octavia hesitates to her friend's question, sighing before cautiously opening up; “Look- I’m sorry for thinking about it again, I know it’s annoying to have to come back to this. I just-… I just want to have a quiet day with dad, like how it used to be when I was younger.”

Loona quietly nods along as she takes another sip of her drink, listening intently to everything Octavia had to say, the hellhound’s staunch attention not once ever wondering off as she spoke.

Via continued with opening up, knowing that once she began there was no turning back; “It probably sounds dumb and selfish, but I miss how it used to be. Dad used to have more time back then; it didn’t matter if we went to a park, to go shopping, or just to hang out together at home for the entire day. It was all so… simple, and I miss that so fucking much. I’m scared that if I ask to do something like this, he’ll start thinking that I don’t appreciate him and the position he’s in. Despite his grueling flaws, I do appreciate him… I really do. … All I want is just a day out where it’s just him and myself, like… a father-and-daughter day. Just like old times before it all got so needlessly complicated.”

Loona knew that this issue couldn’t go on for far much longer. She had to be there for Octavia; she promised that she would earlier today back in town after Via’s nervous breakdown. She finishes the contents of her beer before at last thinking of a solution; “I don’t think that’s selfish at all.”

Octavia turns towards Loona, slightly surprised; “Y-you don’t?”

Loona shakes her head with a look of genuine sympathy; “Nope, not at all! To be honest with you, I think what you’re asking for is very reasonable. Remember how we said earlier today that we’d figure this out together? We might as well start now, hey? … Do you want to contact him?”

Octavia’s gaze darts away from the night sky towards Loona, perhaps a bit shocked at the sudden suggestion though not wanting to admit that it was what she wanted out of fear of embarrassment. After a little bit of thinking, however, she realized that she was with Loona; she wouldn’t mock her for wanting to, would she? No, absolutely not, not after the advice this hellhound friend of hers having given her. After giving off a gentle defeated sigh, Octavia gave her answer; “Please…?”

Loona smiles warmly with a nod before pulling out her phone and handing it to the owlet to the left of her; “Here, use my phone. Talk to him, I’ll be here as support. Don’t be scared, alright? I’m here.”

Octavia looks at Loona’s home screen where the number pad was displayed. She stares at it for what felt like an eternity of stagnation before looking back towards Loona who gives her a reassuring nod as a sign to “go ahead”. After more momentary hesitation, Octavia works up the courage to dial a phone number before pressing “call” before holding the device up to her ear. It took a couple of rings and an awkward ten-second wait in silence before at long last her call was answered.

Loona looks on with anticipation of what was to come, practically ready for any outcome as she tries to listen in:

“…Hello? … Hey, uh, dad.. how’s it going? … Yeah, I-I’m doing good, just here with Loona. … Heh- Yes, of course she’s treating me well, don’t worry. … Where are we? O-Oh, just a.. a place she knows. … Yeah, I won’t be away for too long. Hey look- dad, I’d like to talk to you about something… Uh…”

Octavia begins to stagnate a little, darting her gaze once more towards Loona with guidance, to which the hellhound gestures kindly and patiently for her to continue.

The owlet starts again; “… I’d like to.. Can, uh, can we-… can we go out somewhere together when I get back? You know, just you and me, for old time’s sake? That.. that doesn’t sound selfish for me to ask, does it? … I don’t know why I think that, I just don’t want to bother you, I guess. … It doesn’t? I’m glad it doesn’t, heh- … I don’t know, probably just a place somewhere, like maybe we could go shopping? The park even? … Yeah, I know I said it was boring once, but I take that back. But yeah, could we? I-If you had the time…?”

Octavia seems to listen into her father’s response with her full attention. As she does so, her eyes widen a little and a slight glimmer of relief emanates on her facial expression; “R-really? T-thank you, dad, it… it means a lot to me. … And hey, I’ll even tag along to your places. … Yeah yeah, even that one. … Heh- Okay, dad, I’ll see you later. … I-I love you, too. … Alright, see you soon.”

The owlet then hangs up the call and stares towards the horizon momentarily before turning back towards Loona. Without saying anything, Via gives off a smile which obviously signaled to Loona that things had gone as they had hoped. She gives her friend a smile and gently pats her back; “See? I knew it’d be fine.”

Octavia doesn’t do or say anything for a couple of seconds before suddenly giving Loona a massive hug, similar to the embrace she gave in the hills of California, overlooking that dreaded concrete jungle of a city under the stars. Without any hesitation, Loona tightly embraces her friend’s back, wrapping her arms around Via and patting her shoulder to assure inverbally that everything would be okay. As they embrace, Octavia yawns a little as she feels herself becoming tired after this so-far eventful getaway.

“Getting tired there, hey Via?” Loona comments as she lets go of her embrace.

“I… Agh, I guess so,” Octavia yawns a little more as she rubs the space in between her eyes with the tips of her fingers; “Do you mind if we head back?”

“At your request, my liege,” Loona lightly banters with a bit of humor to Octavia’s slight amusement; “We’ll head back through the way we came, pretty certain I know where we came from; well, I least I hope.”

“My liege?” Octavia repeats back to Loona with a slight smirk; “I thought Jim was our servant.”

“Oh well, it never hurts to have two servants, does it,” Loona chuckles as she leads Octavia back down the pathway with her phone light illuminating the way before them, as well as turning on her phone’s navigator for good measure.

“Oh, be quiet,” Octavia quips back with an entertained smile and an eye-roll as she follows closely behind, carrying the remaining bottles including her own beverage.

Quite The Party

Octavia slowly wakes up just before the crack of dawn, looking up towards the ceiling with her tired eyes practically battling to finally open. For whatever unknown reason, she had been denied a proper night's sleep, waking up at least four times throughout the evening which only served to irritate her. As she sluggishly battled to wake herself up, Octavia figured that at best, she only had a maximum of five hours in total of the type of sleep that the body uses to fix itself.

Through her convoluted thoughts, she tries to pinpoint exactly why this was happening; did she eat something? Was it something she caught from Earth during that getaway she had with Loona, bringing it home with her when she arrived back home two days before? It's not as if she'd be too surprised if it was, as harsh as it sounded; sudden changes in the environment tends to stress the immune system out. She didn't feel as if she was coming down with anything, however, which puzzled her even further.

Octavia's sleep-deprived train of thought is suddenly interrupted as a small, polite knock on her room's door emanates with almost an echo. After groggily sitting upright in her bed with a tired and strained wince, she finally speaks, albeit slurred; "Come in.."

Octavia's bedroom door cautiously opens with a drawn-out creak, the noise slightly reverberating throughout the immediate surroundings as one of her father's servants, a smartly-dressed imp with a suit, overhanging cuffs, and a well-groomed hairstyle, peered around from behind the door which was three times his own height.

The servant clears his throat quietly before then speaking in a polite tone of voice; "I-I do apologize for disturbing you, your highness. Your father wishes to see you in the kitchen."

It took Octavia a couple of seconds to process what had just been said, but eventually she reacted by rubbing her hands down her sleep-deprived face. She massages the bridge between her eyes before groggily nodding to the servant at the door; "Thanks for letting me know. No need to apologize," she politely assures before finally getting out of her bed, making sure to make the covers look somewhat presentable before she leaves the room.

The servant nods before making his way back towards the kitchen to alert his master that his daughter would soon be present.

Octavia takes a moment to slouch lazily on the side of her bed, looking out through the slight crack in the curtains as she notices that it is still dark out, the first lights of this new day yet to reveal itself. This made Octavia slightly confused; what was her father doing up so early at this time in the morning? Ultimately, Octavia figured that there was only one way to find out for sure.

After at last gathering the strength to fully awaken from her horrendous night, she makes her way out of her bedroom, opening the door halfway to slip through before quietly shutting it behind her. Octavia begins rubbing her eyes with a tired wince, sluggishly walking down the long corridors of the palace as she did so, wondering to herself why exactly they had to be so long in the first place. Slowly, groggily, yet surely, and with brief moments of stretching her joints to wake herself up, the owlet at last approaches the kitchen where she hears a hive of activity emanating from within, piquing her curiosity.

After the accustomed long hike through the corridors from her room, Octavia reaches the familiar entrance to the kitchen, leaning around the corner to at last find the source of the movement; to her mild surprise, it was her father, standing by the counter-top of the kitchen bench with two plates full of food. On top of the stove was a pan which just had its simmering contents disposed into the two respective plates before it was promptly dumped into the basin of the kitchen sink. With a slight spring in his step, Octavia's father returns to the plates of food to complete the finishing touches, but not before noticing Octavia standing in the doorway with a mildly surprised look on her face.

His face lightens up further as he finally notices the owlet's presence; "Ah, Via; Good morning! I do hope you slept soundly enough, my owlet?"

Octavia began noticing just how genuinely calm and relaxed her father sounded; sure, he was always cheerful around her, but this time it felt different. After shaking her head to snap herself out of her tired gaze, Octavia finally replies to her dad's inquiry; "M-Morning, dad; No, I didn't. Last night was awful," she responds with a tired yawn before going to lean up on one of the walls; "W-What are you doing up so early?"

Stolas begins multitasking by putting all of the ingredients away and disposing of the used cooking utensils into the sink for later; "Oh! Well you see, I didn't sleep too well the night before either, so I have decided to practice studying cooking techniques," he informs with a slightly charismatic tone to his voice as he picks up both plates in his hands; "Now! Let's try this out, shall we?"

"I suppose," Octavia agrees, still confused as to why her dad seemed so genuinely relaxed; it's almost as if he had been drugged, as harsh as it sounded.

She slowly follows her father to the dining table as he cheerfully slides both dishes onto its surface, one plate on one side and the remaining serving directly across from the former. Afterwards, he at last takes his seat, waiting for his daughter to come join him at the table while pouring themselves both something to drink. Octavia obliges by taking her seat directly across from her father, still observing him with confusion.

Eventually after a couple of seconds of silence, Stolas notices his daughter's odd suspicion which confuses him slightly; "Is there something the matter, Via?"

Octavia blinks a couple of times, snapping out of her analyzing and tired gaze; "Oh, i-it's nothing, dad.."

Her father, however, knowing his daughter, wasn't too convinced. As he picks up his fork to eat, he asks again with persistence; "Are you for certain?"

"Of course I'm sure," Octavia almost immediately replies as she picks up her fork, glancing down at her food for a split second before looking back up; "I just noticed that.. you seem.. happy."

"Of course I'm happy," her father cheerfully replies with a calm smile; "I'm here with my daughter on a beautiful morning, am I not?"

"Of course, that's perfectly reasonable," Octavia acknowledges; "B-but, you seem… genuinely happy."

"A-ah, I see.. I see what you mean," Stolas concedes as he takes a small first bite of his breakfast so he could speak further, his eyes shifting a little in thought; "I suppose you have caught on."

Octavia raises her eyebrow a little; "H-how do you mean?"

Her father's smile dims down slightly as he begins to think, not wanting to admit anything that would worry his daughter. After a bit of hesitant thinking, he decides to tell the truth; "About how I am feeling. You're growing up, Via, so I suppose the time is right to inform you openly; I-I suppose I have not been doing.. too well with how I am on most days, to be entirely honest."

Octavia huffs slightly, giving off a slight knowing smile before finally taking a bite of her food, which to her surprise tasted quite pleasant; “I’ve known this for quite a while, dad; you can’t hide much from me.”

Stolas chuckles endearingly as he continues to eat slowly, only taking small bites so he can continue talking openly to his own daughter; “Ohoho- you are most excellent at reading people, my owlet; you certainly are.”

Octavia snickers a little as she savors her father’s rather impressive cooking; she couldn’t think of a time before where he had tried such a menial task such as this, though she began wishing he had done it more often in the past. Silence briefly takes over the scene before she breaks it once more; “Why do you try to hide it from me, dad? That you’re hurting?”

Her father hesitates on this notion, blinking a couple of times in thought before clearing his throat and speaking again; “Because I don’t mean to concern you with my own battles, Via; I.. I have always wanted you to be happy.”

Octavia nods in acknowledgment of this position before making a counter point; “I appreciate that, dad, I really do. But you have to realize when you’re not doing well… I’m not either. I want you to find enjoyment in things as well.”

Stolas blinks a couple of times as he looks in his daughter's direction, a small assuring smile appearing; “But Via, I want you to understand that I do. When I’m with you, that is my source of pure enjoyment, my source of happiness.”

Octavia looks up from her drink; “Really? You mean that?”

“Of course I do,” Stolas sincerely reaffirms; “You are the lone star, the only star, that makes waking up in the morning all the while worth it. That is the reason I woke up so early this morning; so I could do something for you, which in this case was to make you a delicious breakfast, an excuse to… an excuse to be with my own daughter for once, even if it’s for a brief moment in time. I can be an absolute fool, Via, and I sincerely apologize for having not taken time in the past to be here with you for simple, genuine moments such as this. That day-trip we went for when you returned? I found I enjoyed that so terribly. Do believe me when I say that I sincerely want to do more of that with you; with my daughter.”

Octavia couldn't quite believe what she was hearing; it felt like a dream, but the cold sensation of the glass of drink in her hands told her that it wasn't. There were a million possible things that she wanted to say to her father to express her thanks, but ultimately realized that she only needed to say one thing. A small, thankful smile slowly spreads across her face while she looks at her father with a sense of gratitude for this moment; "Thank you, dad. I… I appreciate this all, I really do."

Stolas smiles back warmly, glad to hear of this admission; "You're most welcome, my lone star. It is my sworn duty as your father to take care of you, after all. Oh! And by the way; How are you finding my rather amateur cooking?"

Octavia snickers briefly as she takes another forkful of her breakfast; "For your first time? It's not bad."

"Oh, I am glad to hear so," her father exclaims fondly as he eats his own serving, considering whether or not he should try something like this again.

"What's happened to the cooks if you were the one cooking this morning," Octavia inquires out of sudden mundane curiosity, considering the fact that their imp servants were treated like numbers at best and like living garbage at worst.

"Ohoho- You need not worry about them, Via; I've given them the morning off. Besides, I feel quite generous today. You must feel sorry and show mercy for them every once in a while," Stolas goes on to explain as he ate more of his meal, taking mental notes on what he could improve upon with regards to his culinary skills.

Octavia hums in response, eating more of her serving, finding that her father's cooking had oddly begun to cure her of the sleep deprivation-induced aches she felt. In fact, it could be argued within reason that perhaps her father's cooking was much better than anything that the usual cooks made - not to demote or minimize their hard work at all, of course. While Octavia becomes increasingly more awake, she realizes what today was; it was the day of that gathering Loona had generously invited her to as a first-timer.

She immediately began thinking anxiously on what to bring, what to wear, and what else to-

"Hmm? What's gotten you all excited so suddenly," Stolas eventually interrupts his daughter's thought process, a knowing look in his eyes as he momentarily stops eating, nearly done with his serving after all.

Octavia snaps back to her senses, aware that perhaps her father had caught on, which puts her on the spot on what excuse to make. Her father wouldn't bear the thought of his own daughter going to a potentially rowdy party with alcohol and other assorted paraphernalia: "I, uh.. it's nothing at all, dad, just realized what today was."

"Oh? What is so special about today," her father inquires, raising his eyebrow a little in confusion.

Octavia's thought process stagnates a little, trying her hardest to figure out a believable story. She didn't have much time to come up with something until it looked as if she was hiding the truth. To her own relief, Octavia at last thinks of a convincing story; "I.. I'm going out shopping with Loona later today. We'll be going out for the afternoon to this.. this mall we wanted to check out, Loona was bragging about how great it was."

"Oh? Is that so?"

Octavia nods rigidly, hoping that this explanation was convincing enough; "Yup. Just for some, uh.. some new clothes and whatnot, see if we can pick up anything interesting."

"I understand," her father nods slowly; "Much like that taxidermy you bought home most recently?"

Octavia hesitates a little before at last answering with a nod in return; "Yup."

"I see," Stolas acknowledges, though he found it a little difficult to believe that this was the whole truth; "If that is the case, then I do hope that you two enjoy it!"

"I'm sure we will, thanks dad," Octavia smiles as she begins to think that her improvised cover story was sufficient enough to avoid suspicion, looking down at the remaining parts of her meal while daylight at last began to peer through from outside.

…

Loona slowly awoke in her bed to the sound of Blitz outside in the kitchen of their apartment, the distinct sound of the water in their electric kettle boiling away, presumably for Blitz's accustomed morning coffee. After blinking a couple of times to come to her senses and rubbing the sleep away from her eyes, she briefly checks her phone for anything remotely interesting, only to find a morning text from none other than Vortex, reminding her that the party was on for later today.

Her heart skips a beat as she reads the text, that bashfulness over the male hellhound still prominent after all this time; "Heya, L. Party is tonight, hope to see you there w/ your buddy."

With her tail wagging ever-so-slightly and a small bashful smile, Loona types a quick text before sending it; "Will be there Tex, don't fret."

The half-asleep hellhound grunts as she throws the sheets off of herself, swinging herself out of bed and getting up with a drawn-out, perhaps slightly dramatic yawn. At last finding her footing, Loona comes out of her room towards the kitchen to find Blitz sitting on the couch with his accustomed morning coffee.

The imp's tired demeanor changes to that of light charisma as he notices his daughter groggily approach after her sleep; "Good morning, sweetie! Did you sleep well?"

"Meh, can't complain," Loona simply responds with an indifferent tone, heading to the kitchen to find a peculiar sight; there was another porcelain cup of coffee waiting for her, lightly steaming away on top of the bench's surface; "Huh.. t-thanks Blitz," Loona quietly expresses her gratitude as she cautiously picks up the mug and taking a brief sip of the contents.

"Anything for you, Loonie," Blitz cheerfully responds with a glimmer in his eyes before going off to get himself dressed for the day in his usual attire; "Ready for another day of killing sick, twisted fucks?"

"I guess," Loona simply replies, going to sit on the now empty couch with her morning brew, beginning to mindlessly scroll through her phone as per the norm - not as if there was anything else to keep herself preoccupied; "I suppose you need me to stay behind at the office?"

"In case of any new worthy, desperate clients? Absolutely," Blitz chimes while throwing his coat on, weaving his arms through the sleeves with a little uncoordinated struggle; "Those pindick landlords aren't going to stop asking for that sweeter-than-shit moola, so we need to-"

“Keep up productivity and profit, I know,” Loona interrupts, having heard this all before; “You’ve told me this many times.”

“That’s the ticket, Loonie! I see I’ve finally taught you the value of running a business,” Blitz proudly stated as an observation while throwing on his boots in record time, almost tripping over himself in the process. It was quite often that he ranted boastfully about how proud he was about his glorified guns-for-hire business, especially around his own daughter who had heard it countless times.

“That one way of putting it,” Loona huffs as she sipped more of her morning beverage; “So, who’s on the hit list today?”

Blitz grunts as he slips on his second boot while gaining his footing; “If I remember right, it’s some dumb, inbred dickweed serial killer from… North Dah-koh-tuh? I don’t
know, I’m not good with names; all I know is that there’s a son-of-a-bitch that needs a good killing!”

“Aight, cool,” Loona half-heartedly acknowledges as she gets up from the couch, heading to her bedroom to get herself dressed for the day, bringing the remaining serving of coffee with her.

It’s not long before both Blitz and Loona are on the road in the company van, heading towards I.M.P. Headquarters with Loona being the driver this time while Blitz flipped through paperwork which was required for the day. It contained, among other relevant articles, the details of the latest hit he was assigned to go after; one “Liam Grimes” of North Dakota who lived in a backwoods isolated part of the state. On this case file, it was noted that he was “extremely unapproachable” and will “kill without constraint” with severe anger issues. Sure, it seemed like a challenge for Blitz, but nothing that he couldn’t handle with Millie and Moxxie by his side.

“…I mean, listen to this, Loonie,” Blitz explains to an indifferent Loona who nodded along to her dad’s ramblings, seemingly invested in this “Liam’s” history; “He has been known for fifteen, FIF-FUCKING-TEEN accounts of aggravated assault and seven accounts of murder, only ONE has ever been found! Been on the run under different aliases for nine years! Oh, this fucker keeps getting better and better-”

“Okay, I get it, he’s a big mean lowlife like the rest of them,” Loona interrupts mildly as she looks to the road ahead, “I’m tryna focus on driving here so we don’t end up having a freak accident.”

“Trust me, sweetie; these motherfuckers around us would be very remorseful if they smashed up my van,” Blitz remarks with a threatening, toothy grin.

“No doubt,” Loona sighs while they continue to drive up the road, rounding the last corner towards I.M.P. Headquarters, the tall building with its familiar worn-out design towering in the skyline; “Anyways, we’re here. You need me to bring anything out of the van, or.. what’s happening?”

Blitz swings the door wide open before swinging himself out of the driver’s seat with a spring in his step, paperwork folded tightly under his arm; “Just the usual, Loonie; Gun, that paperwork in the glovebox, you know the drill.”

“Got it,” Loona obliges with a huff, collecting the aforementioned bare essentials before locking the car, linking back up with Blitz who was already inside and waiting for the elevator.

Due to the building being considerably tall, it took a short while for the elevator to at last reach the bottom floor, giving Loona and Blitz time to stand in momentary silence. As they did so, Loona swore that for just a second she saw something, or someone, move from outside near the entrance, just in the corner of her eye. Loona turns her head towards the doorway, just catching what appeared to be someone slithering away quickly, scurrying off with agility from her visible line of sight. The hellhound squints her eyes in brief confusion, trying to figure out if someone was perhaps stalking them.

Blitz noticed Loona’s sudden focus as the elevator’s doors at last swing open, the flat-tone of the elevator alerting both of them to its arrival; “What’s wrong, sweetie?”

“I dunno, I thought I saw someone run away from us,” Loona responds as she follows Blitz into the elevator, still intently peering into the general direction of the entrance doorway, weary of whoever was present with them. She didn’t have long to wonder as the doors slowly closed before the elevator began ascending to the top floors.

“Could it be a new client,” Blitz wonders aloud as he flips through his paperwork and case files, careful not to drop and crease them further.

“I don’t know, Blitz, I literally just saw something move. Probably just some creep,” Loona shrugs as she looks up at the floor number indicator, watching as the numbers increase, turning into double

digits.

It takes a little while, but at long last the elevator slows to a halt before the doors open to their accustomed hallway, the both of them stepping out with all of the essentials before heading towards the entrance to the I.M.P. Headquarters proper, finding Millie and Moxxie waiting for the pair of them to their surprise.

“M&M! My favorite stupidly lovesick dimwits! Good morning,” Blitz gleefully welcomes his two employees with a spring in his step, Loona following closely behind with practically all of their gear.

“Yeah, yeah, morning sir,” Moxxie replies with a yawn, obviously still trying to wake up.

Blitz takes this opportunity to take a jab at this fellow imp; “Well I am so, so sorry to bore you to fucking death, Moxxie,” he sarcastically quips; “You need me to be your clown for today to keep you entertained?”

Moxxie groans while he rubs his eyes and temple, trying to wake up with minimal success; “W-what? No, sir, it’s not that at all, fuck- agh! H-Had to wake up pretty early. Some asshats decided to blast loud music from four this morning.”

“Well shit, Moxxie, I can’t have employees who are half-asleep on the job, now can I,” Blitz exclaims in his usual snarky attitude, practically a staple of his personality when it comes to confronting inconveniences.

“He‘ll be fine, Blitz,” Millie butts in, who was wide awake compared to her husband; “Poor thing just needs his coffee.”

“Heh- Who says I’m a ‘poor thing’,” Moxxie chuckles with a bashful smile.

“I said so, you gorgeous little lovebug,” Millie giggles before enveloping her husband with a barrage of heartfelt kisses, causing Moxxie to practically melt in her warm embrace. Blitz and Loona looked helplessly on to the sappy display before them, wanting it to be over so that they could get on with the important business.

Despite this, the love-struck couple continued with their mutual unwavering affection, Moxxie quickly being overcome with love; “Oh, Millie, you’re always such a sweetheart-“

“You two can have your room and your sex later, we got business to attend to,” Blitz chimes in with a huff, finally unlocking the door after fumbling around with his set of keys. After much wrestling with the paperwork and the lock of the door, it finally swings open, allowing for all four of the IMP team to make their way through, signaling the beginning of what was expected to be a long day.

…

“We’ll see you soon, Loonie! Stay safe,” Blitz calls out to Loona as he steps through the portal she had just opened for them with his firearm over his shoulder, at last going after the main target for that day.

“Whatever you say,” Loona calls back in return as she watches the portal finally close with an indifferent expression, trying to figure out what she was going to do to keep herself occupied.

With the grimoire in her hands, she makes her way back into the tower block and approaches the elevator, jabbing the button to call it down. Almost instantly, the doors swing open to allow for Loona to step inside which she does so, but not before looking back towards the entrance, still thinking about who that silhouette from earlier could’ve been. She quickly shrugs it off as the elevator begins ascending, scrolling through her phone with not much else to do.

After a rather short wait, the elevator finally opens to the floor she intended to get off at, stepping out as she walks alone back to the office. Loona begins to enjoy the trancing peace and quiet as she approaches the office door, fumbling with the keychain before at last unlocking it. She steps through the doorway and towards her usual spot at the front desk, allowing the front door to freely close on its own as she lazily slumps down in her seat, putting her feet up with a languorous yawn while beginning to listen to some music.

A tedious and drawn-out half an hour passes with Loona mindlessly scrolling through her phone, her metal album blaring through her earbuds. This complacency is suddenly interrupted however when a swift and sudden knock on the door rings out, causing Loona to casually look up from her phone. She eyes the door with her eyebrow raised in curiosity, figuring that it may be a new client desiring their services: This was a purely experimental idea from Blitz where new clients could just

walk in and fill out a standardized form about who they want “gone”. Sure, Loona absolutely hated the idea of some random interrupting her alone time, but nonetheless, she had to put up with it; what the boss says, goes. ‘At least something was happening,’ Loona thinks quietly to herself as she takes her earbuds off momentarily

“For fuck sakes, here we go… Come in! The door’s unlocked,” Loona hesitantly calls out to her unexpected visitor, begrudgingly anticipating the purely experimental process of having to list down all the required details into a standardized form.

As expected, the door slowly swung open to reveal someone standing there, though something about this someone seemed… wrong, so incredibly wrong, even compared to the most sick and twisted Loona had ever seen before. His form was all off, seeming to be just under Loona’s own height, his stocky and filled-out frame filling the space in the doorway as he waltzed on in with intent. He wore a bizarrely long dark-gray coat which stretched down and ended just above his ankles, almost like a cape. His gaze was glassy-eyed and cold, almost unfeeling. There was something oddly familiar about this possible new client’s appearance, though Loona couldn’t exactly put her finger on it just yet.

Loona eyes the newcomer with intent as he slowly makes his way over to the front desk, his arms hanging loosely by his side and swinging aimlessly. As soon as he reaches a mere five feet away from Loona’s location he stops, staring down at her with an indifferent expression, the hellhound returning the favor by tapping her fingers impatiently on the front desk’s surface.

After around five seconds of uneasy silence, Loona decides to break it, really not wanting for this individual to be here longer than he needed to be; “Uhh.. can I help you?”

The potential new client nods ever-so-slightly as he begins to speak, his voice low and croaky, almost completely monotone, as if a frog could talk; “I hope you can.”

Loona’s eyes shift as she continues to gaze at the man in front of her, shrugging her shoulders before answering; “Aight. How can we help you, then?”

“I’m here to give you an anonymous tip,” the newcomer announces in his guttural and monotone voice.

“Cool,” Loona acknowledges with her usual cold indifference; “What kind of anonymous tip?”

“I need someone gone,” the newcomer informs, his blank expression staying rigid and uncompromising as he spoke; “He’s an obstacle in the way and we need his money - well… at least I don’t anymore, but my partners, who are still alive.”

“Uh-huh, sure,” Loona blankly replies while slipping out one of the standardized forms, tired of having to deal with this client already; “Just fill this in and we’ll get around to this guy as soon as we can, alright? Hurry it up, I don’t have all day.”

The client stood there unflinching, only darting his gaze briefly towards the slip of paper accompanied by a pen, before looking back up at the receptionist; “I’ve already come prepared,” he informs while pulling out a sealed envelope which contained a letter; “Only open this when someone else is present, it’s a group effort job. Be advised as well; don’t fret if you fail, for my partners, too, will be going after him to give him a warning of his… well, his inconvenient presence.”

“Mhm, mhm,” Loona half-acknowledges while still staring at this rather odd client; “So, what’s this client guilty of? Any, uh, any crimes?”

“Other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time? No,” the client shakes his head slowly.

“What’s his name?”

The stocky client chuckles in his croaky manner, a sly smirk spreading ever-so-slightly on his lips; “You’ll find out soon enough-”

At this point, Loona was agitated by not only this client’s sudden appearance, but his riddle-esque way of speaking. Why Blitz had decided for this new face-to-face approach for new clients, it was beyond her wildest guesses; “Look, buddy, stop wasting my time. Could you stop being so fucking cryptic and just tell me who this guy is?”

Despite the hellhound’s sudden outburst of frustration, the client stays unflinching, uncompromising in his coldness. He merely places the sealed envelope next to the desktop computer before turning around, walking back towards the front door. Before he finally steps through the doorway before him, he stops before turning his head slightly back towards the receptionist’s direction; “All in good time.”

With that final message, the man steps out into the hallway before closing the door behind him. To her honest relief, Loona is left alone once again to her own devices. Although peace had returned with nobody else present other than the company of herself, something about that visitor made Loona slightly unnerved. She couldn't exactly pinpoint the reason as to why this was the case, but she couldn't help but feel that there was more to this "anonymous tip" then he was trying to let on.

Loona rigidly shakes her head, trying to keep her mind off of the event, resorting to shift her mind onto something more interesting; the party for later that evening. She picks her phone back up from the counter and decides to shoot Octavia a text; "Hey, Via. You up to talk? About the party."

After a couple of seconds, a text is received; "Sure. Let me go somewhere isolated first. Don't want dad to hear."

Loona obliges by waiting for the next minute or so, checking the door with a slightly unnerved itch to make sure that whoever that new client was, wasn't standing just outside. Her gaze is interrupted when her phone starts ringing in her hands, startling the hellhound out of her focus. Without much of a second thought, she answers the phone; "Hey, Via, what's been up?"

"Just the usual, you know," Octavia quietly answers on the other end; "What are you up to?"

"Pfft- just here at work, alone with nothing to do; you know, the usual shit I have to put up with," Loona snickers on the other end; "You still free for tonight?"

"Oh, for sure! Where did you say it was again?"

"Just at Tex's place. He's rented out this mansion-looking thing. He can afford that fancy shit, especially with the money he makes," Loona explains while flicking through the desktop computer for any new company Emails.

"Hm, sounds fun," Octavia comments in her hushed tone; "You still want me to bring anything?"

"Entirely up to you, Via," Loona reassures with a snicker; "What were you thinking of bringing along?"

“Uh.. I’ve got, like, a small half-open bottle of rum I found in the kitchen. I don’t think dad would notice if I took it; gotta be careful to not look obvious, though,” the owlet explains with a mischievous smirk.

“Haha, good luck with that one,” Loona trails off as she goes quiet for a moment, thinking on what to say next; “Agh- shit, you wanna hear something odd?”

“Sure, what is it?”

Loona clears her throat a little bit as she darts her gaze momentarily back towards the front door, making absolutely sure that the mysterious client had left; “Before I called you, I had this guy come in with an ‘anonymous tip’.”

“An anonymous tip,” Octavia repeats with slight intrigue.

“Yeah, at least from what he said. I got this letter he gave to me, which I presume has all the details of who he wants “gone” in it. I’m not sure if I want to open it, though.”

“Why’s that,” Octavia asks, full of morbid curiosity.

Loona inhales through her clenched teeth, shrugging a little in reservation to the situation; “Eh, I dunno, he just seemed too… shady to me, even compared to other fucked-up people who have come to us before. I’m not sure how to explain it, though he seemed to be a… special kind of “fucked-up”, you know what I mean?”

Octavia nods along to this information, beginning to understand what the hellhound on the other end of the line meant; “Huh, I think I do. Are you sure you’re safe there?”

“Me? Safe? Of course I am. Bastard wouldn’t want to go against a hellhound, yanno,” Loona chuckles through her teeth, though a part of her was still unnerved.

“Heh- alright, I trust you are,” Octavia smirks from the other end; “You coming to pick me up later today, or what’s the plan?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m coming around to get you,” Loona confirms as she flicks through more Emails, most of them just poorly-crafted scam messages which would guarantee a complete corruption of the computer if she was gullible enough to open them; “I’ll see you then, yeah?”

“Of course. Stay safe, Loona,” Octavia finally farewells.

“Thanks Via, you too,” Loona smiles warmly on the other end before hanging up, once again left to her own solitude devices, at least for the time being.

After much stagnation for the next couple of seconds while thinking on what to do next, Loona decides to shrug everything off, resting her feet once again on the desk and slipping her earbuds back on to the sound of blaring metal. Out of boredom, Loona checked the time; the morning had barely passed and there were still four more hours to go until her co-workers returned. With a frustrated grunt, Loona decided to head to the kitchen to grab herself something to drink for the time being; ‘might as well have something decent to scull down while she dozed off’, she thought to herself.

As time slowly marches on with little event, nothing but her albums on repeat to keep her company, Loona couldn’t help but feel her mind drifting off on to other topics, her thoughts practically running free. Among many other thoughts, such as the party that night and especially Vortex, she found herself thinking once again about that “anonymous tip”, sealed away in that mysterious envelope. A part of her knew that there was something off about this most recent lead; why did it have to be “anonymous”? Loona, despite her hint of reservation, shrugged it off; who was she to question it?

After much snoring, many missed calls from clients, and periodically checking for anything remotely interesting on her phone without much luck, it was at last time to retrieve the rest of the IMP Team. With a sluggish heave, Loona gets up from the desk and heads out of the office to find a more suitable spot to open the portal. After finally heading outside and rounding one of the alleyways, Loona at last summons a portal to allow for Blitz, Millie and Moxxie to come right through.

She watches with a mildly taken aback expression as she observes Millie carrying an exhausted Moxxie in her arms. The IMP’s own marksman looked to have been in a punishing fight, a few sizeable bruises dotted on his face and legs, almost as if he had been in hand-to-hand combat with

whoever he had taken on. His clothes, too, were in an absolute state from presumably being pulled and ripped from whatever nightmare altercation had occurred.

“Woah.. what the fuck happened,” Loona asks in a rare display of common courtesy for Moxxie’s well-being.

“That damn son-of-a-bitch was prepared, that’s what happened,” Millie answers with a grunt, still carrying the injured and exhausted Moxxie in her arms tightly; “Can you help me out here?”

“Uh, s-sure,” Loona obliges. As she was about to ask what exactly they needed help with, Millie exhaustingly hands Moxxie over into Loona’s arms to the hellhound’s surprise; “You’re kidding me, right? You want me to carry this sad, decrepit sap back to the office?”

“You offered and agreed to help, hellhound. I’m giving you something to help us out with,” Millie effectively told off her much taller coworker while stretching her own aching joints.

Loona stutters in protest for a moment before at last sighing in defeat, begrudgingly accepting the menial task of practically looking after Moxxie for the time being; “Fine. But you have to hold this damn book, I can’t carry everything. Oh, and by the way - I’ve got a NAME, you know?”

“Fine by me,” Millie obliges in a rather uncommon sign of cooperation with her hellhound coworker; “Just be gentle with him, please?”

“Of course,” Loona grunts, looking down into her arms at the clearly spent white-haired imp, her brow furrowing a little bit with concern; shit, he did look like he had been through a great deal.

Blitz leads the reunited IMP team back up to their headquarters, Loona managing to carry a considerably spent Moxxie the entire way up, even going as far as verbally checking with her injured coworker if he was in any position to walk on his own, only to be met with a wheezing breath and a weak shake of the head.

“Huh.. Never knew you’d ever be so nice to him,” Millie queries openly to Loona as they step out of the elevator and towards the office.

Loona looks down at Millie who was to her left side; “I know I can be a bitch, but I’m not THAT heartless.. I guess. What happened anyway?”

“Let’s just say that depraved and rotten bastard didn’t go down without a fight,” the wrath imp simply explains while Loona carefully places the weakened Moxxie down on the couch who was, at last, regaining his composure and an adequate awareness of his surroundings.

“Fuck, no kidding,” Loona remarks, slightly dumbfounded as she quickly retrieves an available first-aid kit they had near the kitchen, swiftly handing it over to Millie, the wrath imp then expressing her gratitude for the hellhound’s help. As gently as she could, Millie began tending to Moxxie’s wounds, gently dabbing them with some cloth before patching them up, whispering comforting words into his ear. Luckily for Millie, her husband had returned to full consciousness as he warmly smiled through his pained body, thankful to have someone like his wife to be with him.

Blitz and Loona decided rightfully to leave the imp couple to their own devices, choosing to move to the other side of the room to talk. Loona is the first one to begin talking, this time with a request; “Hey, Blitz, can I borrow the van for tonight?”

Blitz spins his head towards Loona after taking a massive drink, his throat effectively parched; “No. Nonono! Nuh-uh! Please don’t tell me you’re going out to one of those parties of yours again, Loonie!”

Loona, as per usual, got around this obstacle by lying; “No no, it’s not a party, I’m just taking Octavia out to go shopping.”

Blitz, perhaps unsurprisingly, wasn’t entirely convinced by this explanation; “‘Shopping?’ You’re just going shopping? You better not be lying to me, young lady!”

Loona groans a little in frustration, sneering at the fact this wasn’t as straightforward as she hoped; “I’m not, Blitz, I promise! Look- if you’re so concerned that I’ll head off to a party or something, you.. I can’t believe I’m fucking saying this, but you can.. call me as many times as you like, okay?”

Blitz raises his brow a little, slowly but surely considering the proposal; “Really?”

Loona nods in cooperation to her father's perhaps justified paranoia, relieved that she may be able to get her way; "Yes, really. Trust me, I'm not going to bullshit you."

It takes Blitz a couple of seconds to have a proper think on the proposal, but after much consideration he looks back up at his daughter with a definitive answer; "…Okay. Okay, sweetie, I'll trust you."

Loona lets out a small sigh of relief, satisfied that it was all going according to plan; "Thanks for that, da- I mean, Blitz, I really appreciate it."

"I know you do, don't worry," Blitz smiles sincerely while he heads into the kitchen for a snack, properly starving after a hard, most likely gruesome day's work.

Moxxie wearily calls out to Loona on the other side of the room with a slightly baffled look on his bruised face; "D.. did you just call him 'dad'?"

"You better drop it, fattie," Loona is quick to refute, obviously not wanting to express that level of affection so openly, especially around her coworkers.

…

This was it. It was finally time. It was finally time and Octavia, despite her best efforts, could just about barely hold her excitement.

Like Loona, the owlet had relayed the agreed cover story to her own father that they were just "going shopping", as well as managing to quietly sneak the bottle of half-open rum into her jacket's inner pockets. Octavia was now waiting by the entrance to the manor, waiting patiently yet with hardly-contained anticipation for Loona to arrive in what she was told was the company van. Sure, Octavia imagined that it wasn't particularly stylish or clean and perhaps a little humiliating, but nevertheless it would still get them to their destination. It didn't matter much; as far as she was concerned, Octavia was going to experience something new, something exciting, all while in the company of a good friend.

Just as she is about to check the time, Octavia hears the sound of a car horn sounding off somewhere in the distance to her right which catches her attention. Lo and behold, it was a dark

gray van with its lights on, and in the driver's seat was the familiar shape of an all too familiar hellhound, unmistakably Loona, who was wearing her usual attire that late afternoon. The van pulls off to the curbside before Loona rolls her window down to call out to her awaiting passenger; "Hey, Via! Are we ready for tonight or what?"

"Of course! It's either now or never," Octavia smiles gleefully with anticipation and a hint of nervousness, making her way over to the passenger's side of the van and swinging the door open.

Loona chuckles a little as they begin driving down the road; "That's a good way of thinking. You bought anything along?"

Octavia obliges by pulling out the small bottle of rum from her jacket, swirling the contents in the container around with a smirk; "I always keep my word, Loona. Hope this isn't too bad."

"Oh, that's perfect," Loona reassures with a grin, anticipating to savor the taste of what was presumably some expensive alcohol; "How are you feeling about this? Are you excited?"

"A little," Octavia downplays her excitement; "I'll be frank, I'm a little bit nervous as well, this being a first time for me and all, you know?"

"Nah, don't worry about it, I know how you feel," Loona reassures as they continue driving; "I remember how I felt the same way when I first started going to shit like this. You'll get used to it quickly though, especially if you're in good company."

"I'll take your word for it. So, uh, who is this "Vortex" guy you keep talking about anyway," Octavia decides to ask, wanting to gather more information. After inquiring about the male hellhound in question, she couldn't help but notice Loona's tail beginning to wag slightly, accompanied by the hellhound's facial expression turning into one of slight, yet growing, bashfulness.

"Eheh.. w-well," Loona stutters ever-so-slightly, trying to keep her composure while a small smile breaks through her lips; "He's this huge hellhound that works as a bodyguard for this bitchy, self-important succubus called Verosika if I remember right. We've bumped into her personally once, honestly the most insufferable skank I've ever seen."

Octavia takes all of this new information in with intrigue, becoming genuinely invested in the outside world; “Is he nice?”

“Oh, absolutely he is,” Loona confirms; “I’ll introduce you to him once we get there. He’s been asking if you’ve been coming for the past day or so.”

“Huh… that’s nice of him,” Octavia quietly remarks as; “I’m guessing by the way you’re acting that you have a crush on him?”

Loona’s scarlet-red eyes widened a little, realizing that she had perhaps let her feelings run wild while talking about the tall, dreamy, well-built… Dammit, there she goes again. Finally, after once again reaffirming her composure, Loona breaths in through her teeth with a light, pensive shrug; “Eh.. I mean, I still do, but the guy’s got a girlfriend now, so… as much as I hate to admit it, I reckon that ship has already sailed.”

Octavia watches the outside world pass by her through the window, the scenery changing to that of wilderness as she gives her answer to Loona’s conviction on the matter; “I’m sorry to hear. Hey, you’ll find someone else in the future, I’m sure of it,” the owlet reassures with a smile.

Loona smiles softly in response to Via’s attempt at comforting her; “Heh. Thanks, Via, you’re really sweet. Nevermind, let’s move on from that depressing shit, yeah? Uh.. oh yeah! You told your dad the same cover story, right?”

“Sure did! I made it sound all convincing and such,” the owlet explains with a smirk, still aimlessly gazing through the tinted windows of the van. Octavia calmly observes the light of the day growing dimmer and dimmer with long, dark shadows growing ever larger, reaching over the dark gray van like one huge giant veil of darkness.

Silence fills the interior of the van for the rest of the way to their destination. As the road stretches ever onward, Octavia decides to take the spare moment to catch some sleep before the presumably long evening with Loona’s permission, not as if the hellhound would care anyway. The designated driver for the night takes a brief swig of an energy drink she had bought with her, swishing it around in her mouth before finally swallowing, needing to keep herself awake - it tasted below sub-par and brimming with the shittiest artificial sweeteners, but it would suffice. Although it took a little longer than expected, the sight of a large house at long last appeared in the distance as the van rounded a slight corner in the winding road.

Loona slows the van down with care before spinning the steering wheel around to the right to enter onto the pathway, leading up to this rented manor-looking building which appeared to be brimming with life from inside. Almost as if it was an instinct, Octavia wakes up with a confused blink, her eyes focusing to catch the decently sized building before them. Not before long, Loona carefully parks the company van behind a couple of other vehicles which were parked in a line, at last putting it in park and opening the door to get out.

“Alright, we’re finally here. You need anything before we go in,” Loona addresses Octavia who was stretching her arms to wake herself up.

“Mm.. No, I reckon I’m all set,” Octavia concludes after thinking on the notion, at last gathering her nerves before they finally join the party; “Are you?”

“If when you say “ready”, you mean going into a room with a bunch of potentially drunken asshats? I guess I got no choice,” Loona remarks as a quick-witted mundane joke to Octavia’s momentary amusement.

After a final mental checklist of everything they needed, and everything they had with them, then double-checking that the company van was locked and secure, the pair of friends at last make their way up to the entrance of this rather impressive abode. It had two floors, a balcony on top which appeared to be locked, presumably for the safety of whoever decided to scull down a few too many beers. It appeared, however, that this party was only relegated to the bottom most floor, at least from what they could tell by the lack of light through the windows on the second storey.

Both of their footsteps echo up the steps, both beginning to hear the ever-growing sound of chatter and commotion when they reach the front door. Loona turns her attention from the door towards the owlet standing timidly next to her, slightly huddled behind her for protection if need be: “You ready?”

Octavia, giving off a slight calm huff, nods once.

Loona acknowledges this with a nod back, turning her head back towards the door and giving off a couple of loud, echoing knocks to get someone’s attention. It takes a couple of seconds for anything to happen, but sure enough the sound of someone shuffling their way towards the door echoes from somewhere within, getting louder as the answerer gets closer. The door suddenly begins to shift open, a considerably large and tall silhouette emerging from the other side. Octavia stands in awe of just how large this answerer was, his shoulders broad and covered by an equally as large spiked biker’s jacket.

The large figure's face, despite its seemingly menacing appearance, wore a sudden welcoming smile as it supposedly recognised who it was greeted by; "Loona! Really good to see you again, man!"

Loona's ears folded back a little while she tried her hardest not to make a fool of herself; "Oh! Tex! Eheh, hey- uh.. It's good to see you, too! How-how's things?"

The figure, now clearly this "Vortex" Octavia had heard much about, shrugs his huge shoulders; "Ehh, it's pretty decent! I keep going, that's all that I'm concerned with."

"T-this is Vortex?" Octavia's inquisitive and quiet voice emanates from behind Loona, slightly intimidated by the imposing figure on the other side of the doorway.

The taller and imposing male hellhound shifts his attention towards the shorter figure huddled behind Loona; "Huh. And I assume this is your friend, then?"

Loona suddenly snaps out of her flustered, fixated gaze at the mention of Via; "Oh! Y-yeah, this is her! You wanna say hi at all, Via?"

"Uhh.. hello? I'm Octavia. It's, uh.. it's nice to meet you," Octavia timidly introduces herself, still trying to get used to the sheer shock of just how imposing, if not intimidating, Vortex was.

"Great to meet you too, Octavia," Vortex optimistically greets in return with his hands in his jean pockets. In an excellent example of his hospitality, the large hellhound gently extends one hand out for a handshake. After a little bit of consideration, the owlet cautiously decides to mirror the gesture through her own much smaller hand meeting his, gently shaking Vortex's firm hand with a faint smile.

"By the way," Vortex suddenly adds in an afterthought; "If you two need anything, just come straight to me and I'll sort it out."

"Appreciate it, Tex," Loona smiles, darting her gaze towards Octavia to make sure that she was still comfortable.

“Anytime! Come in! I’ll let the rest know you’re here,” Vortex invites with a welcoming grin, turning around and returning to the larger populated room at the end of the hallway.

With that invitation coaxing them in, the pair at last enter this rather impressive abode, admiring at how pristine it was from the inside; Loona was not kidding when she said that Vortex was practically dripping in money. The reverberating sound of faint music could be heard in the room where this gathering was presumably taking place, accompanied by the sound of lively conversation, the inviting sound growing ever louder as Loona and Via reached the end of the hallway. With much anticipation of what they would find, they both enter the large room.

The room was quite spacious, almost like a miniature convention hall, with a large dining table with alcohol, miscellaneous food, and other assorted articles which the other attendees had presumably bought along. At the far end of the hallway was a large window which enabled for a terrific view of the outside, and underneath this window were two large, pristine velvette-red couches which covered most of the back wall. On the opposite end of this large room was the entrance to what was presumably the kitchen where a large fridge was visible through the doorway. Accompanying both Loona and Octavia in this room were five other hellhounds, including Vortex, who was only just now announcing the arrival of their new guests, a few of the hellhounds glancing towards the pair’s location with a curious look.

“Took you long enough to arrive,” one of the other male hellhounds, a shorter and stockier looking one, called out to Loona with a teasing grin.

Loona rolls her eyes; “Just appreciate that I came in the first place, not like I’ll miss anything. What are you asshats doing anyway?”

“The usual; getting pissed and making a fool of ourselves,” the stockier hellhound informs before his attention turns towards the shy-looking owlet next to Loona; “Who’s this you bought along?”

Octavia rubs her forearm a little, her gaze averting in a display of her reclusiveness.

“That’s Octavia,” Vortex butts in, gesturing to the shy newcomer; “I want you all to make her feel at home, alright? I want no dumb shit like last time, got it?”

The other attending party guests, perhaps knowing their place, nodded in agreement to this strict order. Who would blame them, though, with the sheer imposing presence Vortex had over them, standing like an overshadowing superstructure, sturdy in its craft.

Loona stays by the owlet's side while they make their way over to socialize, placing the half-open rum Via had brought along on the large table as they did so. Lively conversation starts again as the pair of new arrivals resorted to sitting on the free couch, with Loona making sure for the time being that the first-timer was comfortable with her surroundings. As much as she wanted to as well, Loona had ultimately decided, and rightfully so, to hold back on the alcohol for the night - she had to return Octavia back home after all, in addition to having the responsibility of driving.

While Loona checks her phone briefly, Octavia for the meantime cautiously watches on as the small gathering of hellhounds continue chattering noisily with one or two of the attendees appearing to become increasingly tipsy. Vortex, meanwhile, continues his own conversation with the rest of the more sober guests, cackling loudly on occasion. Although progress was slow, Via at last began to feel that she was in good company, proving Loona's earlier statement about "having a good time" correct.

"Hey, look, thanks for bringing me out to this, Loona," Octavia expresses her heartfelt gratitude while she continues to get used to her new surroundings.

"Don't mention it," Loona gently smiles in return, gently nudging the owlet in the shoulder; "If you want to ever try something like this again in future, let me know."

Questions began to emerge inside Octavia's mind; "So, uhh.. What do we usually do at stuff like this?"

Loona shrugs a little; "There's no code, really - just hang out and have fun. Usually what I'd do is begin drinking whatever cheap shit they have here. I can't do that tonight obviously, I got you and the van. That, and I gotta actually do some work tomorrow."

"Ah, okay," the owlet acknowledges, observing as one of the more drunken guests begins to doze off on the couch, before turning her attention back towards Loona. To continue a form of conversation with the hellhound sitting to her left, Octavia secretly points towards one of the drunken hellhounds who had just begun snoring away; "Who's that passed out over there?"

“Oh, him? That’s Keith,” Loona informs, looking towards the slim hellhound who has just passed out - a part of one of his ears looked to have been half-torn off in an accident of sorts; “A clumsy dickweed, not to mention an absolute fucking lightweight, as you can see. He’s usually the first to pass out at shit like this; put a bottle of even the cheapest poison in front of him with the least amount of alcohol in it, he WILL chug it down like water, then sleep like a baby for a full twelve hours.”

“Huh… who’s the fatter one,” Octavia turns her attention towards the stockier hellhound who spoke earlier.

“Axel,” Loona states, seemingly glaring at him; “He’s an idiot, let’s just say that.”

“How so?”

“Oh, well, it’s not as if he’s an asshole or anything like that, he’s more of a well-meaning idiot. He comes off as abrupt, but he doesn’t mean it - at least I think he doesn’t,” Loona explains, practically giving an in-detail synopsis.

Octavia takes all of this information in as she observes the other hellhounds present with her, making a mental note of everyone for purposes of deciding who to talk to and who to absolutely avoid. While the shy first-timer does so, Vortex pulls away from the rest of the small crowd to approach the pair on the lone couch; “So! Are you two finding it alright here?”

“Oh, for sure,” Loona affirms with confidence; “Just giving Octavia a run-down on who everyone is.”

“Fair enough,” Vortex nods before shifting his attention to Octavia; “You wanna come talk to the guys? They’re asking about you.”

Octavia looks up at the towering hellhound with one eyebrow raised: “Are they?”

“Yeah! They haven’t seen someone like you attend parties like this, you know? They have some questions they wanna ask you.”

Hearing this, Octavia became mildly hesitant; what type of questions? Was it anything bad? She knew the type of reputation her family had, especially among “lesser” beings like hellhounds and imps. A doubting part of her began to think that maybe she shouldn’t’ve attended this gathering in the first place.

Loona notices Octavia’s reserved hesitancy, therefore deciding to intervene; “I’ll come with you, Via. If they say something stupid, I’ll butt in.”

“I’ll sort them out if anything dumb happens, too,” Vortex reassures with a smile; “I’m sure they’ll behave - well, they better, if they know what’s good for them.”

Via continues to think on what to decide; should she go ahead to speak with the others while risking potential confrontation, or should she decline the offer? It wasn’t as if she was in any immediate danger, and even if she was, she did have Loona and Vortex to protect her if anything confrontational arose, as confirmed by themselves mere seconds ago. After weighing her options, Octavia gives a gentle nod; “S-Sure, I’ll come talk,” she obliged as she lifted herself up from the velvet-red couch.

With Loona following closely behind, Octavia approaches the small group of hellhounds who were talking amongst themselves for the time being, until they were interrupted by Vortex who began introducing the owlet behind him; “Alright, here she is! No stupid questions now, you hear?”

The hellhounds’ curiosity peaked as they noticed the owlet who was examining them intently. In order to give her as much space as they needed, albeit with some encouragement from both Loona and Vortex, the group dispersed slightly so that they didn’t look as intimidating. Octavia didn’t know what to expect, but it certainly wasn’t the warm welcome that she received as the group of hellhounds began introducing themselves in a rather extroverted fashion. Remarkably, they didn’t seem repulsed or suspicious of the owlet’s presence, more rather intrigued if not welcoming. She was quick to learn their names:

‘Axel’; the stockier hellhound with dark brown and beige fur, who she had heard speak earlier upon their arrival.

‘Keith’; the tall and slim light grey member of the group, who had remarkably gained consciousness after his alcohol-fuelled crash.

‘Morger’; the rather reserved member of the group with light gray and black fur, similar to Vortex in stature and appearance, who had quite the nasty scar running down his right cheek, presumably from a rather fierce altercation.

“Was wondering when you’d finally join us,” Morger remarks in his growling, low-pitched voice, arms crossed while he leant up against the nearest wall; “I gotta ask, it’s been itching me since you got here; you’re nobility, aren’t you?”

Octavia’s heart sinks a little, not sure if this was the beginning of some sort of confrontation, desperately hoping that it wasn’t. She winces a little before answering with the truth, ready for whatever backlash was about to come her way; “Uhh.. Y-Yeah, I am. Is that bad?”

Just in case Morger was about to give the owlet some sort of trouble, Loona quickly shoots him a deadeye look which tells him to ‘watch it, or else.’ If there was any intention from the reserved hellhound to do so, Loona’s protective and stern glare seemed to drive him away from following up on the thought:

“N-No, I personally don’t think so. Whether or not someone’s an asshole is all that matters, I guess,” Morger cautiously responds, glancing back towards Loona to see if he had made the correct choice of words. The female hellhound’s inconspicuous nod back towards him in approval confirmed that he had, perhaps to his relief.

“Yeah, don’t worry about where you’re from - we’re all cool here, no bad blood from us,” Axel reaffirms the sentiment all the while holding a half-empty beer he had picked up; “We do give Tex’ here a bit of shit from time to time, though.”

Octavia exhales a little in amusement; “Yeah? Why’s that?”

The stocky hellhound shrugs: “Eh, no rhyme or reason; he’s just fun to pick on,” Axel admits, Vortex meanwhile took a swig of a newly opened beer he found - sure, it was lukewarm but it would suffice.

A slurred, obviously drunken voice pipes up from the general direction of Keith who had grown considerably wasted: “He’sh a biiiig shoftie, y-your absholute highness,” he slurs severely, the lightweight hellhound’s hand-eye coordination and balance completely obliterated while he swayed clumsily, practically threatening to trip over his own feet at any given moment..

Octavia grows mildly curious, if not somewhat concerned, of the clearly intoxicated hellhound's state: "You know, you don't have to be 'that' formal with me - I'm not a snob. You okay there by the way? You seem pretty, you know.. uh, drunk."

Keith appeared to react rather incredulously: "M-Me? Druhnk? Nahhhh, not me, little d-dude. I may be waeshtid, b-but what I am, unlike the resht of yah idiots…what I ahm ish free.. I ahm free!"

"Uh-huh. Sure you are," Loona sarcastically remarks with an eye-roll and a smirk, finding this intoxicated display mildly amusing, watching helplessly as the drunkard stumbles back onto the couch with a loud grunt; "All you are is a lightweight, now sleep it off before you make a bigger idiot of yourself."

Keith begins to wave his hand lazily towards Loona's general direction, incoherently mumbling something in return before finally dozing back off into dreams of who-fucking-knows-what. It doesn't take long until the familiar sound of his snoring emanates amidst the noise of both the music playing faintly and the conversation that was otherwise still continuing. Questions and answers are exchanged back and forth for the next couple of minutes, both genuinely interesting and arguably genuinely stupid in their respective nature. This included varying questions such as "do you hold any special powers" to a question that Morger asked; "Can you do me a favor and turn this guy I fucking hate into stone", though this latter question was taken as a joke; at least they all hoped it was.

One question stood out compared to the rest of them, one that was asked by Vortex: "So what made you want to come along to this?"

Octavia blinks a couple of times, trying to figure out what he meant; "What, to this party?"

Vortex shrugs with his palms open; "I guess so. I don't have a problem with it, just asking out of curiosity. It's not like we have anyone other than hellhounds coming around to these types of things, especially not nobility."

"Yeah, that's fair," Octavia admits, feeling slightly as if she was being put on the spot; "I don't know, I just wanted to try something… different. Most days, I'm usually sheltered in my room away from the world. I don't know about you, but that kinda thing gets boring after a while."

"I can imagine," Vortex concedes, though a part of him yearned for a more luxurious lifestyle; "Do your parents know you're out here with us fools?"

Octavia snickers; “Nope! Dad reckons I’ve just gone out shopping with Loona.”

“Telling white lies, huh? Sounds like something our most-sociable Loona would do,” Axel interjects with a teasing smirk, prompting Loona to flip him off in the background.

“Who is your dad anyway,” Morger asks the nagging question that lingered all the while he sipped some of the premium rum Octavia had bought with her.

Octavia smirks softly at this question; “If I told you guys, you’d freak the fuck out.”

Morger, however, was persistent; “Oh, come on now - He can’t be all that terrifying.”

Octavia chuckles at Morger’s perhaps foolish courage; “You wanna bet?”

Octavia at last felt confident everything was fine, seeming to no longer need Loona to stand by her at every waking second, although the hellhound did stick around by the sideline in case of any potential trouble. Loona opted to gravitate towards the table loaded with alcohol, ultimately deciding to take a minuscule swig of the rum Octavia had brought along. On the odd occasion, she’d get a phone call from Blitz to see how the “shopping trip” was going, only for Loona to hastily imagine a pretty convincing cover story which did the trick to calm her father’s compulsive nerves.

After a little while of lively talk, the group’s charisma dimmed as the night continued on, leaving Octavia to group back up with Loona for a progress report.

“Look at you being the life of the party,” Loona comments in a light-hearted fashion; “I thought I’d never see it!”

“Honestly? I never thought I had it in me either,” Octavia agrees with the sentiment while taking a moment to sit down; “I think we should head back soon, though - Don’t want dad to become suspicious of where we are.”

“Yeah, I getcha,” Loona obliges while checking her phone for the time; “Don’t fret, Via; leave all that time-keeping shit to me. I can be reliable when I feel like it.”

Octavia chuckles a little, her eyes scanning her surroundings for anything interesting; “I trust you. … Hey, Loona? Wasn’t there a fifth hellhound when we first got here? Haven’t seen him in a while.”

“Hm?” Loona scans her eyes around the room, doing a rough headcount; “… Huh. Yeah, pretty sure there was. .. No, you’re right, he’s gone.”

Octavia joins in by doing a double take, and sure enough there was one less party attendee: “What’s happened to him?”

The female hellhound’s brow furrows, trying to figure out the answer to that question herself: “Not sure… I’ll ask Tex for you, see if he knows.”

“Do you know who he is?”

Loona thinks on the question for a few seconds before answering; “Not a clue, to be honest. I mean- I see him sometimes, but I’ve never spoken to him. Can’t remember his name either, as he always fucks off.. Somewhere, I don’t know.”

While looking around the room herself to figure out where the missing attendee could’ve gone, Octavia decided to go outside for a moment, but not before letting Loona know of her future whereabouts. With a light huff, the now lone owlet makes her way outside to the front, gently closing the door behind her before resting herself down onto the top steps, looking out into the horizon with an unfocused gaze. Despite her initial doubts in the beginning, the first-timer felt that everything had gone better than anticipated; this exact momentary thought entered her mind while she sat alone. It took Octavia a good ten seconds for her to realize, however, that she wasn’t necessarily alone out here.

Initially unbeknownst to her, alone on the bottom steps sat a smaller, lankier hellhound with light beige fur, hunched over and appearing to be writing in what seemed to be a journal. He begins muttering to himself every time he writes a new addition to his assumed personal memento-keeper, obviously intrigued in his craft. Every-so-often he’d look up into the sky before turning his head back down into the confines of the book.

For what felt like an entire minute, Octavia debated with herself on whether or not she should interrupt this individual. She didn't need to make that decision, however, when the hellhound freezes suddenly before turning around to find out whoever was behind him.

Upon discovering that it was Octavia, he raises his eyebrow in confusion; "Can I help you?"

"No, not at all, just sitting out here," Octavia assures the hellhound who nodded back, returning his gaze back towards the book in his hands. They both go quiet for a few seconds before Octavia speaks again: "I started wondering where you ran off to; haven't seen you since I arrived."

The lone hellhound chuckles softly: "Heheh. That's a first, you know? Someone giving a shit where I 'run off' to - and I barely know you."

Octavia couldn't help but feel sorry for this lone hellhound. If anything, he sounded rather self-depreciating: "O-Oh.. I'm sorry to hear."

Rather unexpectedly, the hellhound begins to laugh at this act of pity bestowed to him: "HAH! Hey, don't take me too seriously! I'm just a nerd who likes sitting alone! I'm introverted that way."

"Ah. I see," Octavia is quick to respond, looking down at the beige hellhound below her who was still indulged in his writing: "What are you writing?"

The hellhound shook his head, not once stopping his continuous writing in what appeared to be remarkably clean cursive: "It's nothing really, just some self-indulgent nerd crap."

"Hey! I'm a nerd too - pretty sure I'll understand the gist of it," the owlet cheerfully replies as she leans forward with her arms folded in her lap, becoming mildly intrigued by the subject matter this new face was writing about; "What are you writing about?"

The beige hellhound stops and ponders for a minute, seeming to be deciding whether or not he should spill his secrets to what was a complete stranger; a rather "high-society" stranger no less. He thinks for a while until he sighs, concluding that he probably had nothing to lose; "Poetry. I like writing poetry. I have to admit, it's almost like an addiction."

“Is that right,” Octavia asks, becoming ever-so-increasingly intrigued on the subject matter. Never once had she heard of a hellhound taking an interest in poetry before, or any other person she knew for that matter; this thought made her wince slightly, fearing that she was basing off of stereotypes.

“Yup, that’s me alright. And don’t worry, I know whatcha thinking; “A Hellhound? Liking poetry?” Morger in there likes to fling crap at me about it, though I couldn’t give less of a hoot about what he thinks,” the beige hellhound admits with a dismissing shrug, realizing the terrible unintended pun he had just made.

“Huh,” Octavia mumbles, looking back towards the door briefly before turning back around; “He sounds like an asshole.”

The hellhound poet chuckles heartily, shaking his head; “You wouldn’t know the half of it. Oh fuck, sorry! Just realized I haven’t told you my name; I’m Bourke.”

“Bourke.. huh. I’m Octavia,” the owlet introduces herself; “I like the name, by the way. It’s… oh, how do I say this… rough, yet oddly pleasant-sounding.”

Bourke snickers through a slightly-parted smirk; “I appreciate it. I see you’re trying to be poetic yourself.”

“I might as well,” the owlet confirms; “Not like there’s much else to do here other than drink, smoke, and witness a barely-functioning drunk guy falling over.”

A loud chuckle emanates from Bourke while he finally closes the book he was writing in, knowing full well that Octavia was directly referencing Keith who was, knowing him, probably still slumped in the couch during his alcohol-induced slumber. The beige hellhound gets up from the base of the steps with a light heave, stretching his arms and back while turning around to face Octavia. He leans himself on to the railings in a casual fashion, crossing his arms to make himself comfortable; “I’ll say again; you really don’t know the half of it, little dude. There’s always something happening at crap like this - I just come to attempt socializing, usually with little success. You came with Loona, didn’t you?”

“Yup. She was kind enough to ask Vortex if I could come along to this, brought me along for a ‘first-time’ thing, to see if I would enjoy partying. I suppose I do, but I don’t much like the drinking

side of things; I'm probably not used to it. Who knows, maybe I'm just boring."

"Hey, don't be like that," Bourke interjects with sincerity in his tone of voice; "You're not boring, you just have preferences on what you like. I'm the same, to be frank with you. Sure, drink as much as you'd like, but I'd rather not do it; making a fucking idiot of myself is something I'd rather not have on my track record - besides, I got too many responsibilities to afford doing it."

"That's reasonable," Octavia admits, wholeheartedly respecting, if not completely agreeing, with the sentiment. There is silence while both parties think on what to say next, both not wanting this introductory conversation to end on such an abrupt note.

It is Bourke who is the one to break this deadlock with a question; "By the way, how'd you meet Loona? You two don't seem to be the most likely of friends - no offense."

Octavia snickers a little to this rather true analysis; "No no, none taken at all! Oh, look; it's a long story. Let's just say that we met in perhaps one of the most bizarre of situations, up in the hills overlooking some dumb, dirty city. We haven't known each other for long, but she has supported me, given me the time of day."

Bourke raises his brow at this rather unexpected explanation: "Huh, fair enough. Sorry if I seem surprised; it's just that, and don't tell her this, Loona doesn't seem to be the type to do that kinda thing."

The owlet smirks at this rather fair observation: "Hey, you're not alone in assuming that about her. I didn't, either."

"I'm sorry, what's this about me?"

Both Octavia and Bourke are suddenly jolted out of their conversation by an all too familiar voice. They both turn their attention to the now opened front door where Loona now stood, leaning on the doorway frame with one eyebrow raised in curiosity.

"Oh, Loona! What-what are you doing here," Bourke is quick to greet with a stutter, knowing deep down that he was perhaps about to be in a tremendous world of pain, sponsored and inflicted by yours truly.

“Eavesdropping, what does it look like? What are you two talking about,” Loona asks bluntly, getting straight to the point.

“Oh, it’s nothing. We’re just talking about poetry, the party and all that,” Octavia butts in, seeing that signature look of mild suspicion growing within Loona’s scarlet eyes towards Burke. It was slightly obvious that for whatever reason, Loona didn’t entirely trust the beige hellhound around Octavia - whether this was out of obligation to protect her friend was up to anyone’s guess.

Loona seemed confused if not almost entirely incredulous; “Poetry?”

Octavia confirms the subject matter with a brief nod: “Yeah, poetry! Bourke was sitting out here and writing some. I sort of want to hear it, to be honest; he’s practically sold it to me.”

Loona darts her attention back towards Bourke who was nervously smiling, most likely fearing the female hellhound’s wrath: “Is that what you do alone all the time? Write.. poetry?”

Bourke began to cringe in light embarrassment, worried what would happen if he admitted it: “Hasn’t Morger told you before? I figure that he would’ve by now.”

Loona seemed baffled at the mere suggestion of this question: “What? Morger tells me Jack-shit about anything, he barely speaks half the time, that surly bastard; why would he tell me that you write poetry?”

The beige hellhound further down the steps with his book snug against him shrugs with a nervous, toothy grin: “I-I dunno, I’m just guessing. Look, berate me as much as you’d like, Loona, I don’t fucking care.”

The female hellhound seems taken aback: “Why would I want to berate you out of literally everyone else? I mean, come on, at least you’ve got something unique to show.”

Bourke’s ears perk up upon hearing this, mildly unbelieving on what was just said; “Unique?”

Loona huffs a little in disbelief: “No, it’s oh so fucking common to hear about a hellhound writing poetry,” she remarks with intense sarcasm; “C’mon! Let’s hear it, Shakespeare.”

“… Is this some kind of joke,” Bourke asks with a narrow squint in his eyes, trying to figure out if this was some kind of mockery.

Loona doesn’t answer. Instead, she shifts her position to stand fully outside on the landing in front of the entrance, folding her arms and making a light gesture for him to go ahead. Octavia observes the male hellhound who had practically been put on the spot, waiting with honest intrigue for this articulate bit of writing to be read by its author.

Bourke stood there, figuring out on what to do next, though after much hesitation decided “fuck it” and went for it: “Ah, crap- Alright! Fine. I’ll read it. But I damn well swear, Loona, if you torment me about this…” the beige hellhound sighs in defeat, once again abruptly opening the book to read the passages he wrote - whether he was going to regret this, he was about to find out soon enough.

The glorified poet clears his throat all the while feeling himself sweating bullets, beads of nervous sweat collecting on his brow in minuscule droplets; “Alright, so.. this one isn’t done yet so it probably sounds like shit, probably like the rest of my stuff - I’ve titled this one, “The Valiant Fight”…”

A couple more seconds pass, Bourke mentally preparing himself for what mockery may come his way before finally, after much anticipation, the self-reading of his work begins. What both Loona and Octavia heard was an oddly moving example of articulate writing, a form of writing that obviously originated from his heart. Bourke read slowly and passionately; that of the tough, stoic nature of the average hellhound being practically at the bottom of the hierarchy.

It felt so genuine, so much so that even for someone as stoic and firm as Loona, even she had to admit, albeit privately, that she began to feel ever-so-slightly moved. Octavia listens in awe, rather impressed with the range of vocabulary that Bourke had chosen; small wonder why he had to sit alone to think about words that even the owlet herself hadn’t heard before. The small prick of an emotive tear begins to appear on the side of his scarlet-red eyes as he reads the closing passage, breathing out gently in relief as he closes the book, bracing himself for Loona and Octavia’s honest critique.

There is a drawn-out silence as a consensus between the pair is formed. It was Octavia who carried the subject matter onward with her own honest thoughts: “Wow.. I didn’t know what to expect.. I liked it! You’ve definitely put careful thought into it, I’m impressed.”

Loona is the next to voice her own conclusion, who had become unexpectedly impressed by what she had just listened to: “The feeling’s mutual. Gotta say, uh- Bourke; although I barely know you, you come across to me as someone with at least half a brain - same can’t be said about most people I know.”

Bourke was taken aback; he wasn’t sure what he was expecting in regards to a response, but it certainly wasn’t the hospitality that these two were giving him. He smiles in a mildly bashful kind of fashion while scratching the back of his head: “Well, shit guys, I don’t know what to say. Thank you, I suppose-”

“Boring the women with poetry again, hey Bourke?”

The beige hellhound’s eyes widen as an all too familiar rough voice sounds off from behind Loona. She turns around to find who else but Morger with a glass grasped in one hand, looking directly at Bourke with a large shit-eating grin.

“Oh, piss off, Morger,” Bourkes sneers back, now slightly embarrassed though confident; “I’ve told you before - I’ll read and write whatever the fuck I’d like, and those who want to hear it, WILL hear it!”

This very vocal reaction only served for Morger’s smug grin to grow even wider: “Oh, calm down, Bourkey! I’m only breaking balls with ya.”

“Quit being a fucking asshole, Morger,” Loona intervenes with a wry chuckle; “Besides! We did ask for it.”

Morger, quite teasingly, decided to scoff at the suggestion: “What? You wanted to succumb to sheer boredom?”

The female hellhound shrugged; “If you’d like to call it that, then sure! At least Bourke’s got a working brain, unlike your dumbass.”

“I’ve got muscle - that’s all I need,” Morger retorts right back, which proves an old saying that Octavia swore she had heard somewhere before about brain and muscle.

Loona gives up trying to reason with Morger, huffing in defeat as she looks down at her phone for the time. She becomes alert when she realises that the hours were getting longer; “Ah fuck, it’s getting late. Sorry guys, gotta get Via home before her dad gets suspicious - trust me, you DON’T want that to happen.”

“I can only imagine,” Morger remarks, shuddering at the thought of the sheer wrath that would come their way; it wouldn’t be pretty, to say the least, like a hunter being torn apart alive by a Lioness protecting her cubs - this time, however, it’d be an owl prince with unfathomable power. Morger clears his throat; “Ah well, look, thanks for coming along Loona, it was fun while you were here.”

“Always a pleasure to hang out with you dweebs,” Loona smirks in return, stretching her arms with a grunt before going inside to announce her departure to the rest of the congregation.

Octavia, too, follows suit to say her own farewells, especially to Vortex who allowed for her to come along in the first place. She finds Vortex lounging around on one of the free velvet-red lounges, looking slightly exhausted as the night progresses. While Loona prepares to leave, gathering all of her own belongings and mingling with the more tipsy partygoers, Octavia approaches the bodyguard with newfound confidence: “You alright there, Vortex?”

Vortex whines a little, rubbing his eyes from exhaustion: “Argh! Ha- yeah, I’m alright Octavia. Don’t mind me, it’s just been a longer type of day.”

Octavia smiles lightly; “Don’t worry, I understand. Yeah, um, so Loona and I will be leaving very soon, and I just wanted to thank you for, you know, accepting me here and allowing me to be a part of this.”

Vortex returns the friendly gesture by giving off an appreciative grin, lazily waving his hand in an expression of gratitude: “Hey, don’t mention it, no need to thank me! To be honest, though? I should be thanking you.”

Upon hearing this, the owlet appeared to be taken aback: “What for?”

“Put it this way,” Vortex goes on to elaborate while kindly escorting Octavia back outside, following behind Loona who swung the keys around her fingers aimlessly; “It’s not everyday that we have… folks of higher social status around, if you get what I’m saying - It’s even rarer when they end up treating you with respect, like an equal, or even acknowledge our existence.”

“I suppose that’s one way of thinking about it,” Octavia considers with a soft smile; “Don’t think of me as someone of higher status, think of me as just another nerd.”

Vortex heartily chuckles as they walk out the door, Loona approaching the van in the near distance and unlocking
the doors; “Alright, whatever you say! But yeah, thank you so much for coming along. If you ever want to try something like this again, let us know and we’ll welcome you anytime!”

“Hey, I think I will! Only if dad doesn’t catch on,” Octavia calls out while approaching the van, hopping into the front passenger’s seat while Loona waits patiently, scrolling through her phone in mundane boredom.

“Who is your dad, anyway,” Vortex calls back as Loona starts the engine, the gray company van starting back up with a little bit of struggle.

“Oh, he’s Stolas,” Octavia cheerfully replies while waving, Loona honking the horn once to say goodbye to the rest of the congregation as the van pulls out of the property and back onto the main road.

Vortex watches as the rear lights disappear into the darkness, trying to process what the owlet had just said. A look of stunned, silent realization sat almost permanently on his face.

Keith, who was still rather intoxicated, stood next to Vortex while swaying uneasily, a similar expression of sudden realization sitting stagnant on his face; “D-did she jusht say herr dahd ish… S-Stolas?”

Vortex wipes some nervous sweat from his brow before heading back inside with an uneasy step; “I need a drink.”

…

Loona wakes up within the confines of her bed the very next morning. Luckily for her, not only was there no excruciating hangover (due to her considerable restraint from drinking the night before), but neither Blitz nor Stolas suspected a thing - they had continued to believe that there was no party, just a wholesome get-together with the company of solely each other. The lack of the distinct smell of alcohol on Loona's breath also served her well when she came back home and crashed in her room, with Blitz being none the wiser of where they went in reality.

With a slight groan, Loona lethargically gets up from her bed, no longer feeling like laying in bed for any longer. The freshly awake hellhound blinked a couple of times while she sat on the side of her bed, rubbing the sleep from her eyes before massaging the back of her neck, prompting a satisfying audible "crack!" After finally waking herself up, Loona reaches her hand over to grab her phone. She does find her phone within her grasp, though something small and rectangular sat underneath it.

Loona turns her eyes towards the mystery object; sure enough, nestled underneath her phone was the same same letter that the "anonymous tipper" had handed to her the day prior. The memory of her lazily resting it on her bedside table the evening before came back to her, answering her question of "how the fuck did that get there."

One question remained unanswered, however, perhaps the most pressing and important of all; "What was in it?" The strange client's low and croaky voice came back to her; "Only open it when the others get back. It's a team effort." The reservations that Loona had for this particularly strange individual came back to her, once again making her oddly uneasy. Ultimately, the hellhound decided that she'd play along with his game - she'd open it up with Blitz, who by the sounds of things had already awoken, charismatically shifting around the apartment to get everything ready for another day's hard work.

Without a second's thought, Loona has a change of clothes, slipping out of her pajamas and into her usual attire, ruffling her hair a little to take out the knots. Afterwards, she grabs her phone and the peculiar envelope, holding it in one hand and opening her room's door with the other. She is greeted with Blitz brewing his morning caffeine fix, the electric kettle once again boiling away while he flicks through his collection of files.

Blitz becomes his usual charismatic self when he finds his daughter approaching him: "Morning, sweetie! Another fucking great morning, isn't it?"

Loona rolls her eyes with indifference to the suggestion; "Hm. Sure; gorgeous, riveting. Whatever you say, dad."

Blitz's pupils dilated with a glimmer, accompanied by a wider-than-usual smile of joy, beyond ecstatic to hear his own daughter call him 'dad' - he personally figured that he'd never get over that warm, fuzzy feeling: "Aww, Loonie~! You really don't have to call me that!"

Loona grunts a little while she grabs some food in the fridge to eat; "Yeah, well - I did anyway, put up with it - and don't you dare tell Millie or Moxxie."

The imp merely maintains his ecstatic smile while he finally pours the boiling water into his coffee mug, stirring the contents into a concoction as he did so. Loona collapses onto the couch with the snack in one hand, savoring the taste. In her other hand was the envelope containing the letter, causing Loona to once again examine it with a persistent, nagging curiosity.

After much hesitancy, she makes her move; "You know, a client came in yesterday with a job."

Blitz's mood perks up immediately after hearing this, an almost childlike excitement emanating from him; "Oooo~! Spill their secrets - who was the deprived freak that came in," he asks with charismatic anticipation, cutting two small pieces of cucumber to put over his eyes.

Loona shrugs; "I dunno, didn't give me a name. He said it was an 'anonymous tip'. All I know for sure is that he looked particularly disgusting"

This element of surprise only served to excite Blitz even further: "Hah! Right, so an anonymous living one-man freakshow? Fuck, this HAS to be a good one! Imagine the possibilities of who this guy could've been - a convicted murderer, a serial killer, a sadist, o-o-or! Wait! What if he was a-"

"Do you want me to read the tip or not?" Loona abruptly interrupts Blitz's runaway train of thought, the excitement of a new, mysterious client brimming her dad full of morbid charisma.

Blitz excuses himself by gathering his composure, clearing his throat before sitting himself onto the other side of the couch, both his fresh coffee and the cucumber slices resting in his hands. Blitz lazily sat himself down on the couch, resting one leg on top of the other and placing the cucumbers on his eyes: "Of course! Go right ahead, let's hear this shit - dammit, this better not be some sort of fucking prank."

“Guess we’ll find out now,” Loona sighs, ripping the fold of the envelope open to reveal what was, indeed, a letter contained inside. She pulls the contents of the envelope out, revealing the letter neatly folded with near perfection; “Huh.. No, it seems genuine, Blitz.”

“Thank FUCK,” Blitz sighs in utter relief; “Let’s hear it!”

Loona obliges by flipping the letter open to reveal a paragraph or two of the same vague language the mystery client spoke the day before; “Oh, great; he’s written it in his stupid cryptic way of speaking,” she explains before groaning, rubbing her fingers in between her eyes:

“Here we go.. “If you have opened this envelope at the correct time, then you must know that the time is right. The individual I have tasked you to go after is one who stands in the way of-” Blah blah, fucking blah… holy shit, this guy really is pretentious, this is painful,” Loona admits wholeheartedly, finding it oddly amusing just how much of a “hot-shot” this mysterious client thought he was.

Blitz seemed to agree, going by the pained groaning sound he made as Loona read the message; “So what? It’s just another sad cocksucker with nothing to lose and full of vengeance, nothing new. I’ll give him five stars for originality, though!”

Loona snickers a little to this remark; “That’s to say the least. Alright, let’s continue. … Dammit, it’s just more cryptic bullshit filler, more edgier-than-thou words… Oh thank fuck, here’s the end; “Provided below is the address to this aforementioned target. Let it be known that if you fail in your task, there will be no payment.” Alright, so this is the… the address…”

The apartment falls silent as Loona analyzes the written address, her expression changing from that of indifference to one of baffled disconcertion. She silently reads over the address over and over again to make sure that she absolutely got it right.

Blitz takes the cucumber slices off his eyelids, looking towards his daughter to find her intensely analyzing the page with a concerned look on her face; “What’s the address, then? Loonie? … Sweetie?”

Loona is devoid of any ability to respond. She continues to stare disconcertedly at this ‘anonymous tip’, clearly taken aback at the information provided to her, her mouth hanging slightly agape as if she had been stunned. One word played persistently in her thoughts about this tip; “wrong”. It was so incredibly “wrong”.

Blitz feels himself grow concerned about Loona's sudden hesitancy to read the full details; "L-Loonie? What's wrong? I-..Is everything okay?"

It takes a couple more seconds for Loona to give a semblance of a response, turning her head towards Blitz with an apprehended look plastered on her face, her eyes full of bewilderment and concern. Loona tries to say something as a response but decides against it, instead resorting to shaking her head rigidly as if she was forcing it.

Without warning, Loona suddenly jumps up from the couch to Blitz's utter confusion:

"S-Sweetie? Loona, what's wrong?"

Blitz watches as Loona swiftly heads back into her room to retrieve something within. After a couple of seconds of finding whatever she was looking for, she storms back out to her dad's alarm to see what his daughter was holding wide open in her hands; The Grimoire.

The imp's eyes widen in alarmed shock; "Woah, what the fuck! What are you doing with that thing!?"

The hellhound doesn't respond, choosing to ignore her father's questioning as she suddenly summons a portal in front of the apartment's entrance door. Now Blitz was beyond bewildered, watching on with severe perplexion, feeling his temper grow ever hotter with the fact that his own daughter wasn't listening to his desperate questioning. Now adding to this beyond confusing situation was the portal to Earth sitting open in his own fucking living room with Loona about to step through it!

"LOONA, STOP!"

Loona jumps to the sound of Blitz's angry tone of voice! She swiftly turns around to find Blitz with a furious and concerned look plastered on his face, trying to make heads or tails of exactly what had gotten her all worked up!

Breathing heavily, Blitz finally asks the pressing question demanding an answer: "What the fuck do you think you're doing, young lady!? Tell me what's going on, I demand to know!"

“Returning the damn favor!” Loona abruptly bellows back in return! This time, though, she didn’t yell at her own dad per se, rather at whatever situation was unfolding. Without another word, Loona, with Grimoire firmly resting under her arm, runs straight through the portal with haste!

“HEY! SWEETIE! GET BACK HERE RIGHT NOW!”

There was nothing Blitz could do, watching on as the portal quickly shuts before him, leaving him alone in the apartment.

There was only one string of words that Blitz could muster together: “...What in the ever-loving fuck!?”

(Act III) Returning The Favor

Loona trips over herself through the other side of the portal, landing on her hands and knees in the wild grasses of the dense woodlands, trying her hardest to protect the Grimoire from any possible damage caused by the sudden fall! She breathes sharply, trying to pinpoint where exactly she was so as to not go running aimlessly through the trees; she couldn't afford to do that, something told her that she didn't have much time. With a panting, pained grunt, Loona gets up from her hands and knees, her fur scuffed from the sudden impact with the dusty surface of the Earth.

The sun had well and truly set in the Westerly direction, the remaining light of day fading further and further. Loona knew that the approaching darkness of the night would hinder her efforts to navigate through the dense bushland, wasting further time to find the target that was detailed in that damned 'anonymous tip'. Luckily for the hellhound, after a bit of wandering she began to recognise some landmarks she had seen the last time she came to this part of Earth; a slight dip in the terrain, leading downhill. The sound of a distant truck rumbling across the asphalt of the distant road further confirmed that this was the right direction.

Without any further delay, Loona finally began running, her footsteps pounding the surface of the Earth and her arms pumping widely, running like she had never run before! The hellhound dipped and weaved in between the towering gumtrees, breathing rapidly so that she could keep going!

"C-C'mon, you u-hahh- useless piece of shit… hohh- keep.. running!"

Loona kept swearing and berating herself under her bated breath to keep herself going, hoping beyond hope that she wasn't too late - she couldn't have been, could she? Had they gotten to him already? Why the hell did they want him dead, anyway? Was this a case of "the wrong place at the wrong time"? A million questions emerged all at the same time which hopefully would be answered soon enough.

Loona's sporadic train of thought is rudely interrupted as she loses her footing once again! A sudden dip in the ground causing her to nearly roll into what she recognised as the same old, dried creek-bed that she collapsed into the month or so before. Luckily for her, she manages to catch herself, pausing for a moment to catch her breath for running such a distance.

"Hah-.. hah! Hohh-.. f-fuck..," Loona splutters, swallowing her saliva a little before looking up, finding the all-so familiar sight before her - that same old property she had voluntarily seeked refuge in. The orange hue of the sun setting to the west casted a long shadow, the old homestead

appearing to be radiating that same haunting hue. Instead of the warm, inviting feel it once had in the past, this time it felt ominous and foreboding.

Loona begins moving once more, slowly inching towards the boundaries of the clearing and looking to see if the coast was clear. After confirming such, she sprints right across, her eyes fixated on the house with determination to find out what may have occurred. Her legs pound the gravel and dirt surface of the track, running with sheer speed before finally making her way up the small flight of steps up onto the veranda!

Loona abruptly stops her running, practically sliding up to the front door before checking her surroundings. She catches her bated breath once more, taking the time to pace around the veranda which stretched around the front of the house, looking into every available window to see if she could find the homeowner inside. To her growing concern, it appeared that all the windows had their curtains and blinds drawn.

“Shit.. s-shit,” Loona cusses through gritted teeth in frustration, rounding the corner where the veranda took a ninety degree turn, back towards the faded-green front door. After momentary hesitation, Loona begins knocking loudly on the door, the sound reverberating from the inside as she calls out; “Hey! Hey, it’s-it’s me! Open up! I know you’re in there, open the damn door!”

There was no reply.

Loona tries again, knocking harder, the door practically vibrating with every firm knock; “HEY! You better not be ignoring me out here, Jim, don’t you dare do that! … YOU’RE IN FUCKING DANGER, ANSWER ME!”

Once again, no reply.

Now Loona was becoming furious. Why the fuck wasn’t this dumb hick answering her? His pickup was still here, she checked to confirm this by looking through the space in the garage door! The hellhound is about to knock again before a sudden faint hint of a smell hits her nose, making her suddenly freeze in place. She sniffs the air a little to try and catch the smell again.

No, that wasn’t what she thought it was… was it?

Loona sniffs the air once more, at last catching that strangely familiar smell once again. Her scarlet-red eyes widened in realization of what that ominous smell was.

It was a metallic smell - blood.

“No.. oh SHIT!”

Without a moment's more thought, Loona suddenly kicks the front door in with all of her might, shattering the lock with her sheer brute force, the door swinging into the walls of the hallway with a loud “BANG!” Loona runs into the hallway, calling out to the homeowner once more; she knew for a fact he was in here, she just knew it!

“Hey! Jim! I know you’re in here, you son of a bitch, answer me!”

She swings open every door in the hallway, scanning each room frantically; the homeowner’s bedroom, the spare bedroom, the bathroom, even the laundry - Nothing! Loona lightly jogs into the living room to start her search again. She didn’t have to search for long as a sight to behold lay before her.

What greeted her was the most haunting visual she had ever seen. There he was, James Henry Steele, more simply known as “Jim”, slumped against the wall of the living room next to the flat-screen television which had been seemingly smashed in. He wore a blue button-up shirt and his usual pair of black trousers, his brown Williams boots dirtied from the outside dust. His blue shirt didn’t seem blue anymore, more rather… stained with a large patch of red near his abdomen.

“No… nonono! Oh FUCK NO!”

Loona suddenly rushes towards Jim on the floor, fearing the absolute worst! She practically slides on the hardwood timber floor, scraping her knees a little as she examines him, afraid to touch him. Loona’s muzzle sat slightly agape as she examined him with weary eyes, her left hand slowly approaching his face to check for a pulse.

…

“Ahgh-!”

Loona jumps back in sudden fright as Jim flinches weakly from her touch! A wave of momentary relief hits her; “Dude! Oh thank fuck!”

“L… Loona… L-agh! .. Loona,” Jim sharply yet quietly calls out through pained breaths, his tired, severely unfocused eyes opened slightly, perhaps as much as he possibly could in this pitiful situation.

“Yeah.. yeah it’s me, Jim, it’s me,” Loona frantically responds almost immediately, looking down at the source of the metallic smell lingering in the air.

The wounded young man blinks slowly, obviously exhausted from whatever ordeal he had just gone through. It takes a couple of seconds, but Jim finally manages to focus his barely conscious gaze on Loona’s face. His vision is incredibly blurry, but he manages to make out the concerned look sitting firmly on her facial expression. He winces before coughing a little, breathing with labor through his clenched teeth. Loona noticed that, luckily for him, that there was no blood within his mouth, signaling that hopefully nothing major had been hit.

Jim makes an attempt to say something more; “… I’ve been… I’ve been hit.”

“I know.. I know,” Loona replied; “Are you still bleeding out?”

“A… A little, I-I think,” Jim weakly responds before tearing up a little; “Fuck, Loona, I don’t-.. I don’t wanna-”

“Hey, shut up, you’re not going to on my watch! Don’t you dare give up on me!” Loona firmly dictates, almost like an order. She looks around frantically for something to cover up the wounds which were still bleeding onto Jim’s shirt. Unfortunately, Loona couldn’t find anything that would be suitable as a makeshift bandage within the immediate vicinity, forcing her to think outside the box in an attempt at urgent improvisation.

“Hang in there, I’ll be right back,” Loona orders before getting up and rushing over to the spare bedroom, swinging the door wide open to find the bed neatly made. With little hesitation, Loona tears the neatly tucked-in sheets off of the bed, folding it with haste over her shoulders before swiftly returning to the living room where Jim continued to sit barely conscious. Loona knew for

certain that a mere strip of bedsheet wouldn't be enough to treat his rather severe wounds, but it would have to suffice for the time being.

She leans down on one leg, tearing a long strip of the white bedsheet off and beginning to wrap the section snugly around the young man's abdomen. Jim weakly groans in agony as Loona tends to his wounds, the hellhound doing it as quickly yet accurately as possible before tying both ends of the sheet into a steadfast knot. To her deepest concern, Jim continued to wain in and out of consciousness, trying to keep himself awake for as long as possible. On the upside, it seemed that the makeshift bandage managed to stop most of the bleeding.

At this point, Loona was stuck on what to do next; what is she to do now? Call an ambulance? They wouldn't make it in time, she figured. She obviously couldn't leave him here to look after himself, that much was for certain. Loona had to think of an on-the-spot solution quickly, as Jim's nightmarish situation wasn't going to get better on its own.

Her train of thought is interrupted when Jim begins to weakly reach towards her with one arm stretched out; "Loona.. he-help me.. I need… I need help," he groans exhaustively, incoherent in his thoughts, his gaze faintly focused on his only source of company for the moment.

Loona's ears folded back with growing concern, increasingly feeling the pressure of the urgent need to think of a solution and fast. Suddenly, a thought popped into her head, making her ears prick up in sudden realization. She glances back towards the Grimoire which was placed next to her on the floor, then back towards the barely conscious and dilapidated Jim. Eventually Loona connected the two together in her head, her eyes narrowing while she decided if she should enact upon it. If it was a good idea was debatable, but was it the only feasible idea? It wasn't as if Loona had much of a choice.

"Please… agh- please don't leave me.. I-I'm terrified, Loona, I'm-…" Jim splutters weakly once more, fear resonating from his clearly exhausted voice.

"I'm not going to, don't panic," Loona soothingly reassures the clearly terrified young man; "As if I'm going to leave you like this. Do you have anything in here you can take to ease the pain?"

"…A-Aspirin.. it's in.. in the… in the pantry," Jim forces himself to speak once more; "Need some.. s-some water, too-…"

Loona understands her task, quickly getting back up onto her feet and making her way over to the kitchen, filling a clean glass full of cool water before managing to find the pantry full of medicines. She flicks through the limited assortment of medicines before finally finding the Aspirin bottle, grabbing the whole bottle along with the glass and rushing back over to Jim's side. Loona twists the bottle open and grabs two tablets before gently feeding them to him, followed by helping the wounded "dumb hick" drink a few sips of water by holding the glass, unable to do it himself for the time being.

Finally the young man gasps after drinking what he felt was enough water, weakly gesturing to the hellhound that he had enough; "T-Thank you… argh-shit-.. thank you. Hahh.. hah.."

Loona nods to Jim's confirmation that she had done everything she needed to do for the time being. She closes the Aspirin bottle back up, screwing the lid on tight, deciding to keep it in case any more was needed. After confirming that she was ready to act upon her plan, Loona tries to grab Jim's attention for just enough time so she could explain her solution: "Hey, Jim, look at me - you listening?"

Although he was still so incredibly weak, Jim managed to give off a minuscule nod of his head, steadying his own breath as much as he possibly could through the pain.

The hellhound slowly breathed out a little, calming herself down from this high-stakes situation, at last beginning to explain the plan: "Alright, I need you to listen to me. I'm going to take you somewhere safer, gonna get you patched up, okay?"

Jim faintly nods, his breathing steadied to a more comfortable rate, though he still winced in pain with every breath he took.

Loona prepared herself to enact upon the plan, working out in her head how she was going to execute this correctly; "Okay. Let's get you out of here, just stay with me," she orders as she gets back onto her feet, then crouching down to pick up the crippled young man slouched on the floor; "Hold on, this could hurt."

With a grunting heave, Loona picks Jim up from under his shoulders, her arms supporting his posture while he winces in pain from the sudden movement, though the Aspirins kicking in did help. Loona felt awful that she was causing him more pain than he needed while she gently slung him over her shoulder, then gathering the rest of the ripped bedsheet and covering Jim with it to hide him as much as possible; for someone else to see Jim where she was preparing to return would spell disaster. Convinced that she finally had a firm grip on the human over her shoulder, she bends

down awkwardly to pick up the Grimoire, managing to grab hold onto the spine of the book with one hand.

Although she was strong enough to carry him, Loona didn't fully anticipate how heavy Jim truly was, the weight of him upon her shoulder causing some discomfort - it felt as if she was carrying a ten-pound weight which was attached to a cinder block. Despite her discomfort, Loona told herself very emphatically to put up and shut up about it; her comfort definitely wasn't the priority at the moment. With a determined and rough exhale, Loona speedwalks straight out of the living room, the foul metallic smell of blood piercing her nose, causing her to become slightly nauseous - nonetheless, she struggled on.

Loona stumbles through the front door and off of the veranda, making her way down the stairs with a heave, trying her best to balance Jim on her shoulder while he continues to stay limp, his condition very much the same from when the hellhound first found him. Loona finds her footing on the grass, gently propping the barely conscious young man on the steps for a minute while she opens the portal using the Grimoire, her palms sweating and shaking with urgency. After what felt like an eternity, the portal finally opens back to home!

With the Grimoire firmly held under her right arm, she awkwardly picks Jim back up, hauling him back over her shoulder with much struggle having to carry two things simultaneously; "Agh! W-We're nearly there! Don't you DARE give up on me, I'm warning you!" Loona bellows almost as if it was an order, covering him entirely with the bedsheet and sprinting straight back through the portal, back towards the direction of her apartment.

"Are you fucking kidding me, again!?"

The rest of the IMP team had met back up at the headquarters upon hearing this most recent development regarding Loona. Moxxie, perhaps quite understandably, was furious upon hearing the recent news from Blitz that the IMP receptionist had run off again. Millie merely rubbed the space between her eyes while their anxious boss paced around the office in circles, biting the tips of his fingers while he fretted.

"Do you know where she went," Millie inquires, frustrated that the hellhound had ruined what was supposed to be another usual day at work.

“O-Of course I don’t, Millie! If I knew where my Loonie was, I wouldn’t be pacing around this cocksucking piece-of-shit office,” the panicked adoptive father-of-one barks back in return, quickly losing his cool at everything and anything.

“Did she say ANYTHING about where she was going,” Moxxie interrogates, trying to get to the bottom of this latest stunt Loona had pulled off, a strong feeling of déjà vu about this unneeded situation overcoming the white-haired imp.

“Look! All she said was ‘Returning the damn favor!’ What fucking favour!? Did she make some sort of deal with someone,” Blitz thinks aloud through his haphazard, muddled thoughts.

“‘Returning the favor?’ W-what’s that even supposed to mean? Returning the favor to who,” Millie asks, pondering the aforementioned statement Loona had made prior to running off into who-the-fuck-knows-where.

Without much warning beforehand, Moxxie suddenly yells out in pent-up frustration, snapping both Millie and Blitz out of their own thoughts; “AAAAAGH! You know what I think, sir? With all due respect, your “DAUGHTER” is nothing but trouble for all of us! She’s caused problems since day fucking one! All of this SHIT could be avoided if she was kicked out of the company!”

Blitz immediately stops pacing around the room, practically screeching to a halt. The room fell eerily quiet with only the sound of Moxxie’s frustrated deep breaths echoing, his chest rising and falling with angered exaggeration. Blitz turns his head incredibly slowly behind him, towards the direction of Moxxie:

“… What was that, Moxxie…?”

Blitz’s voice sounded completely different than to what it usually sounded; his voice sounds serious and deep, speaking in an eerily quiet tone as if about to erupt at an alarming rate. Blitz’s “question” wasn’t phrased as a question either, more rather a chance for Moxxie to take back what he had said - a final way back before things escalated even further than they needed to.

Moxxie, however, and to Millie’s growing concern on the sidelines, refused to back down when he usually would; “You heard me, sir! THAT-.. HELLHOUND is nothing but a useless damn layabout! I’ve told her before and I’ll ABSO-FUCKING-LUTELY tell her again! YOU should take more responsibility for her actions which end up affecting all of us!”

Very poor choice of words, Moxxie - Very poor choice of words…

Blitz eerily turns himself around where he stood, facing Moxxie with a terrifying blank stare, his pupils small within his wide glowing-yellow eyes. Something told Moxxie and Millie that they were in for something unpleasant. Rarely did they ever see Blitz act in this way, if at all before. Their boss deeply exhales through his nose in an unsteady fashion, his piercing gaze stabbing Moxxie with a growing sense of fear for the smartly-dressed imp's life.

"… Tell me, Moxxie Knolastname," Blitz fully addresses the imp before him while balling up both of his fists in so-far suppressed rage, slowly approaching him in a foreboding fashion; "…who gave you the audacity to comment on what I do with my daughter, huh? What made you decide that you should give parenting advice to me out of all imps? … Do inform me, Moxxie… do let my retarded dick-hole brain take in your.. your infinite, pin-dicked fucking wisdom."

Moxxie begins backing up against the wall as Blitz approaches him, getting right into his face. His boss is staring right through him with a look that could definitely kill, breathing slow and deep through his nostrils. The room is intensely quiet before Millie tries to ease the situation; "Come on, Blitz; can we at least talk about this?"

Blitz cocks his head to his right where Millie stood with a deeply worried look on her face, fearful that the situation may escalate with the wrong move. Blitz fixes his gaze on Millie before speaking in that low, eerily calm tone of voice; "…I think we've talked enough, Mildred."

Moxxie snaps out of his petrified state to stand up for his wife; "H-hey.! With all due respect sir, don't you dare call her-"

"With all due respect, huh..?" Blitz when wryly chuckles, his head snapped back towards Moxxie's direction as beads of furious sweat drip down his face; "Where was that respect when you insulted my daughter and my parenting, hey?"

Before Moxxie could give an answer, the taller imp suddenly grabs his collar, choking him as he hoists him up in the air to Millie's horror, pinning him up against the wall with nowhere to go; "Tell me, Moxxie… what. Fucking! RESPECT!?"

"RIIIIIIING! … RIIIIIIING! …"

The tension within the room is quickly shattered as the company phone begins blaring loudly, the intrusive ringing reverberating throughout the building. Blitz's attention is immediately drawn to the reverberating ringtone, still holding Moxxie by the folds of his collar, practically choking him. It was when after a few more rings, the phone stops its repetitive noise before a robotic feminine voice blares from the desktop, signaling a new message:

"You have- One. - New Message," the computer announces before it gives off a monotone beep, playing the audio message that had been sent: "Dad! D-Dad, it's me! Call me back.. argh, fuck- it's urgent!"

"LOONIE!"

Blitz instantly drops Moxxie to the floor with a loud "thud!" as soon as the message is done playing over the phone's speaker. The concerned father makes a mad dash over to the desk, practically tripping over himself to reach the phone. After almost falling face-first into the computer screen, he grabs the phone and begins madly dialing Loona's number with shaking hands, holding the receiver to his ear. The phone rings a couple of times before Blitz's desperate call is answered to his immediate relief:

"SWEETIE! Oh fuck, L-Loonie- oh shit, my heart-, my sweet girl! Where-where are you? I'm-I'm worried sick, young lady, why did you run off on me like that?? .. Y-.. I'M SORRY, YOU WENT WHERE!? … Okay, sweetheart, s-slow down! Just-.. Okay, stop! Where are you now!? … back at the apartment, okay, so why would you go back there!? .. Was he?? Oh shit, poor guy- I-I mean, I guess. So where's he now?"

Blitz's eyes widened in what appeared to be a state of shock and disbelief as Loona seemingly explained wherever "who" was at the current time.

"Loona… Loona, y-you know dad loves you very much… but why the FUCK would you do that!? … Oh my fucking- alright, so.. That's it! I'm coming over right this second, young lady! If what you're saying is true, then you're in some serious trouble, you hear me!?"

Blitz then promptly slams the phone back on the hook before making a beeline straight to the front door to the IMP Headquarters, seemingly preparing to leave. As he did so, he dictated to both Millie and Moxxie who stood there dumbfounded: "I need you two to look after the place for the morning! I'll be right back as soon as I can!"

Both Millie and Moxxie seemed beyond perplexed at the quickly evolving situation, watching helplessly as Blitz marches straight out the door and towards the elevator without a chance to even

catch on as to what was happening. Millie is the one to try and follow her boss, demanding more answers; “Blitz, what- what’s going on? Is everything okay?”

“It’s all under control, Millie, don’t worry!” And with that, Blitz steps right into the elevator, pressing the button to the bottom floor, enabling the elevator doors to close between boss and coworker. The taller imp wipes the sweat from his brow as the elevator continues to descend.

If what his own daughter was saying was the truth, then this was definitely going to be a long day…

Difficult - the one word that Loona could describe this beyond unimaginable situation. This was all really difficult. On top of all this, she really didn’t know as to why she was even doing all this, it would probably be all for nothing, considering his condition - would it all be worth it in the end, or would her efforts be in vain?

Loona had just arrived back into her apartment, practically out of breath with Jim still slumped helplessly limp over her shoulder, the putrid metallic scent of blood stinging her nose. To her sudden relief, she carefully places the unconscious human onto the couch with a heave, Jim’s own pained breaths continuing in their uneven pattern, though he seemed to be stabilizing - Loona hoped, perhaps beyond hope, that this progress would continue. She lifts the bedsheet off of Jim, giving him room to finally breathe comfortably.

On top of this situation, Loona felt compelled to tell Blitz of the situation that had rapidly unfolded, having called him moments ago - she could tell that he wasn’t going to be happy about this, that was to say the least. What else could she do? It was inevitable that somebody else was going to find out about this, might as well beat the odds to the punch.

After much stagnation on what to do next, she immediately stormed to the bathroom to retrieve something that would be sure to help her; the first-aid kit. With haste, Loona flicks the bathroom light on, immediately swinging open the cupboard doors recklessly to find the first-aid kit staring right back at her, begging to be put to good use. She swipes the kit out of the cupboard, sending some other bottles flying before rushing back out towards the couch, rounding to the front of it to once again find Jim still unconscious, his face flushed red with sweat.

“..Oh shit, uh-.. dammit, how the fuck do I do this,” Loona harshly whispers to herself, losing her train of thought at perhaps the worst moment. She knew for absolute certain that somewhere in her mind that she had learnt how to treat bullet wounds; she had learnt it through those low-budget safety courses Blitz had made her take before she joined the company. She had always been under the impression through her cold indifference that they were practically useless; this current situation proved her naive past self otherwise.

“Come on, you stupid bitch! It’s gotta be in there somewhere,” Loona berates herself, her brow furrowed while looking at the assorted chemicals and gauzes in the freshly opened kit.

Suddenly, it hit her - she finally remembered to her greatest relief!

Immediately after getting a clue, Loona gets to work, hastily unbuttoning Jim’s shirt to reveal the numerous gunshot wounds; by her initial count, he looked to have been shot at least five times if not more - whoever had done this to him was obviously determined to finish the job. She gently cleans the dried blood off of his abdomen with a damp rag, wiping over it a few times before beginning to examine the wounds for any remnants of bullets she could retrieve. With her keen eye, she manages to pry out at least three, signifying that the caliber of the weapon used wasn’t too powerful.

“Huh.. Can’t even kill a man right, you depraved, sick freaks!”, she furiously curses from under her breath at whoever had done this, her eyes briefly flickering with intense rage, accompanied with a deep, menacing snarl!

After completing this step, she begins applying liquid antibiotics to the wounds, making the still barely conscious Jim wince and groan in light agony, his wounds obviously stinging! The hellhound had to physically restrain the young man down so as to be as accurate as possible with the treatment, trying the best she could to continue all the while Jim struggled. Then came the gauze patches which Loona promptly stripped off with a loud tearing sound, quickly preparing to apply them before doing so as accurately as possible, covering each wound and applying light pressure to each individual wound to make sure that he had stopped bleeding once and for all.

After much effort on her part, Loona finally let herself breathe again, wiping the anxious sweat from her forehead and brow and practically collapsing ass-first onto the carpet! She begins to take deep breaths, quickly realizing as to how quickly she was breathing, if not borderline hyperventilating. She lies flat on her back, staring up at the ceiling, thankful that she had managed to perform something she initially thought was worthless; so much for that foolish presumption.

“Hah.. Hah! Uff- fuck. Hahh-.. H-Huh, you see, Moxxie, you little twerp? I’m n-not as useless as… a-as you think I am,” Loona compliments herself with a smug smile, proud of herself and relieved all at the same time.

Her little celebration for the victory was over quickly, picking herself up off the floor to check up on Jim’s current condition. Loona places the back of her hand on Jim’s forehead; his temperature seemed to be cooling down, a considerable improvement compared to how it was. She flinches in response to the young man turning his head slightly, miraculously once again showing signs of life after his tumultuous ordeal.

While she monitored Jim’s slowly improving condition, one uninvited part of her began to speak up once more; “Why was she doing this? Was it out of some stupid sense of mutual obligation; ‘You save my life, and I save yours?’ Wasn’t this much more trouble than what it was worth?”

Loona was quick to tell this part of her brain to shut up or else; there was no way in hell she was going to let her indifferent callousness get in the way of saving someone who did the same for her in the first pla-

Knock, knock, knock, knock!

“Loonie! Young lady, you better open this damn door or else! I know you’re in there!”

Loona jumps to the sound of Blitz’s frantic, stern knocking on the other side of the door - he sounded truly pissed. Her scarlet eyes widen, clenching her teeth a little in fear of what was to come before obeying her father’s strict order; she walks over to the entrance door and cracks it open to find Blitz standing on the other side, his arms folded with a stern look sitting firmly on his face.

Loona was about to greet him until Blitz cut her off furiously; “Is this a joke? This better be some cruel joke, young lady,” he scolds while jabbing his finger at her.

Loona was practically speechless, lost on what to say or where to even begin; “Blitz, please listen, I… the letter… he was-.”

Perhaps quite understandably so, Blitz was having none of her excuses today; “Ah-! I don’t want to hear it! You have caused enough for me today, Loona, and I won’t stand for whatever game you’re playing today - let me come inside right this instant or you’re.. You’re grounded!”

Loona was taken aback, beginning to sneer at his incessant ranting; “W-wait a minute, could you just-”

Blitz was having none of it; “Nuh! Don’t you dare talk back to me, young lady! I’m your father, and you need to listen to me, you hear!? Can you do that for just one minute of your time? What you did today was beyond severe! There’s no excuse for running off like that again!”

Loona quickly grew impatient over her father’s insistence to come inside without an explanation: “Dammit, Blitz, why can’t you just listen to me for once in your life!? Can you at least let me explain myself before you berate me like I’m your damn pet!?”

“NO,” Blitz argues right back in return, a scolding look embedded in his eyes accompanied with a deep, sneering frown; “I won’t have ANY of it, I told you! You better accept that or there is no more beer for yo-”

Suddenly, a voice interrupts the tense exchange: “HEY! EXCUSE ME! HELLO! Would you two SHUT UP down there!?”

“FUCK YOU,” Loona and Blitz shout right back in unison down the hallway, towards an imp that had grown tired of hearing their bickering. With a fearful look on his face, the stranger retreats right back into his own apartment.

Loona shakes her head with a deep sigh in defeat, knowing that she was only delaying the inevitable; “Ugh-! Alright, fine! You wanna see for yourself, Blitz? Are you THAT desperate? Go right for it,” she sneers, stepping aside for Blitz to feed his seemingly desperate curiosity.

Blitz huffs in frustration, briskly entering his apartment with every intention to search around; “Come on, sweetie! You know I love you to bits and that will never change, but you really do need to be more honest with-.. with m-..u-uh…”

To Blitz's overwhelming bewilderment, when he rounded to the front of the couch, there lay a certain human, still unconscious and bloodied from his ordeal. He had seen many humans, Blitz, mostly to murder them under a contract or otherwise, but to see one within his house and one that he recognized, in his apartment no less, made something in his mind instantly deteriorate. His eyes widened in a state of what could be compared to shellshock, beads of sweat forming upon his brow.

After what felt like an eternity of staring at the maimed figure, Blitz finally staggered backwards a little, turning around to face Loona. The hellhound was about to say something snarky in return, though upon noticing just how beyond perplexed her father was, she decided against it, figuring that nothing else needed to be said. It takes him a couple of seconds, but Blitz finally whimpers something as he leant up against the wall of his apartment:

"I… I think I'm going to be sick…"

An Unwelcome Surprise

“I-I can’t-I really cannot believe you’d do this to me, Loonie - this is too fucked even for me…”

“Oh, I see! So you’re making this all about you now? Riiight, I see how it is!”

“Don’t twist my words, you know exactly what I mean!”

To describe the tension within the apartment as “severe” would be perhaps the largest understatement imaginable; if anything, the tension between the argumentative hellhound and her equally as argumentative father was far beyond the boiling point, burning hotter than the very surface of the sun. It was perhaps understandable that things were this way; besides, there was a maimed human within Blitz’s apartment laying on his couch, and if word got out that this was the case, then trouble would definitely come their way. The tense arguing continued between Blitz and Loona for at least five minutes, barbs being exchanged left, right, and center, although they were arguing in hushed tones about it so that nobody else would begin eavesdropping in.

Blitz was the most vocal about his clear objection to having this heavy responsibility unwillingly bestowed upon him, though his voice was reduced to a harsh sneer: “I’ve got a damn business to run, sweetie! I really don’t have time to look after some.. glorified sad sack of meat, shit, and bones who by the way is bleeding his juices all over my bed! What possessed you to bring him here in the first place?”

Loona ran her hand down her face in unfiltered frustration; “Dammit, Blitz- that’s what I was going to explain to you at the door before you began running your mouth off like this! This “sad sack of meat and bones” was supposed to be our target!”

Blitz seemed rather perplexed at this; ““Our target?” As in, we were meant to assassinate this shithead?”

The hellhound rolled her eyes heavily; “Nooo, the tip instructed us to keep him safe and out of harm’s way! There was even a message of good tidings he wanted us to give to him!”

Blitz, in his infinite wisdom, took this literally; “R-really? Well that’s a new one.”

Loona's eyes widened in shock to just how seemingly gullible her father was; "You-.. I can't-..You're not being serious, are you? I was being sarcastic! Get the hint!"

"Oh! Well, I'm so so-rry that I can't decipher what the fuck is even going on anymore, Loona!," Blitz exclaims in a hushed tone, rubbing his head from all the stress; "I've been unwillingly thrown knee-deep in the biggest shitpile I've ever come across, and on top of all that, I've got my own daughter against me on this!"

The hellhound stutters in bewilderment to this bizarre notion; "What! When did I ever say, or even HINT, that I was against you? If I was, I wouldn't have called you in the first place, you dense moron!"

"If you WEREN'T against me, you wouldn't have bought-.. THAT thing here in the first place," Blitz hissed with frustration, gesturing to the still unconscious young man on his couch; "Besides! I run a hit-man bizz; we're not some sort of glorified personal security team!"

Loona scoffs, folding her arms with a deep scowl; "Huh! You should tell that to Stolas, then."

Blitz was left speechless, his jaw hanging open as he shot Loona a scolding look, though deep down, a more self-humiliating part of him knew that she was right.

Loona shrugs with her eyebrow raised; "What? Only telling you the truth; hurts, doesn't it?"

Blitz chooses not to acknowledge the considerably "outrageous" statement made, returning to thinking on how exactly they were going to handle this. He paces back and forth, breathing deeply to keep himself calm with his hands on the side of his head.

"Okay… alright, this is what we're-.. no - this is what YOU'RE going to do, young lady," Blitz dictates as an ultimatum; "As soon as his ass wakes up, you are going to return him back to his home-"

"No! I'm not doing that, it isn't safe," Loona suddenly blurts out, really not believing that she had just said that herself in her own freewill.

Her father seemed quite taken aback; “I’m sorry?”

“You heard me! Whoever did this is still out there; it’s a death sentence if he goes back now!”

Despite Loona’s continued protest, Blitz seems unfazed; “Uh-huh, uh-huh. And I should care about this meatbag’s safety why? What’s he ever done for me?”

Loona raises her eyebrow and folds her arms together, choosing to let Blitz figure it out for himself. Eventually, Blitz figures it out:

“Oh, right.. b-but even then, that was all just circumstance! He just so happened to be there when you collapsed, and just so happened to have found you! Come on, sweetie, you know that hillbilly dickweed means nothing to me, and he certainly shouldn’t mean anything to you!”

“I don’t give a damn if he means jack-shit to you or not, he saved my fucking life!,” Loona fires back, raising the tone of her voice ever so slightly above a harsh, hushed tone.

This was the final straw for the imp; “Oh here we go with this again! Actually, you know what? Fine! You want to look after him? Go right ahead; be his personal fucking nurse-maid, but I’m not helping you! All responsibility for that.. THING on the couch is entirely on you! Have I made myself clear?”

Loona sneers at the scolding imp, huffing before giving her answer; “Crystal.”

Blitz sighs heavily, muttering something under his breath before washing his face in the kitchen, then immediately afterwards heading back towards the front door. This catches Loona’s attention for a moment in confusion; “Where are you going?”

“Back to work! We need you there as well, Loons. Are you coming back with me or are you still babysitting that idiot?”

The hellhound hesitates a minute to think about her options, staring back towards the couch where Jim lay. She narrows her eyes in continued concern for his health, sighing a little before making her decision; “Fine. I’ll come back with you, just- for fuck sake, at least give me a couple more minutes, okay?”

“Five more minutes and no more,” Blitz begrudgingly agrees as he heads right out into the hallway, shutting the door behind him abruptly with a slam.

Loona flips her middle finger in Blitz’s general direction while the door shuts between them. It wasn’t as if she cared any less about her father, all she wished was that he was at least that bit more understanding; but then again, it wasn’t as if she could talk. She makes her way to the front of the couch to make some final preparations before she leaves for work.

For the next couple of minutes, Loona double-checks to see if the young man would be okay healthwise, if Jim would live through this incredibly tough situation. Loona checks for everything; his pulse, his breathing, the gauze wrapping she had applied to his torso and abdomen, small patches of blood staining them. She furrows her brow with slight concern, but after a while she figured that Jim would persevere through this; he had to. Just before Loona finally decides to leave, she hastily writes a note for him on a sheet of paper, placing it on the floor and pinning it down with the Aspirin bottle from earlier.

The hellhound lets out a long exhale, her brow furrowed in concern; how would Jim react when he finds out where she had brought him for refuge? Loona figured that she would eventually have to cross that bridge when it came. Without much further delay, she grabs the apartment keys and heads outside, closing the front door behind her and firmly locking it.

“…Agh-! Nnff-! H-Hah..”

At long last, Jim awakens to a stinging sensation acquired from his ordeal the hour or so prior. With the slightly less-overwhelming feeling of searing pain within his abdomen, the maimed young man opens his eyes groggily, staring up at a most unfamiliar ceiling. He doesn’t immediately move right away, merely staring upwards in this rather gloomy room which was incredibly new to him. He moves his hand up towards his face, noticing that his eyesight was still blurry though it had somewhat improved. He gently placed the palm of his right hand on his forehead, rubbing it back and forth across to soothe his somewhat intense headache.

“Ahh-.. fuuucken ‘ell,” Jim slurs his words, the headache hindering his efforts to form a more coherent sentence.

The young man hesitated as he felt a light pressure near his abdomen, peering down himself to find his bloodied shirt unbuttoned and some gauze patches scattered firmly on his wounds. Jim carefully examines the handy work done to treat his acquired injuries, noticing the spots of his blood lightly staining the gauze patches, though the intense bleeding had long since ceased. He carefully prods one of the patches, which was obviously a dumb idea, flinching at the sudden, intense stinging pain which resulted from the sudden pressure.

Onya Jim, you idiot.

His body resisted his attempts to move, but eventually with much pain, Jim propped his back upright against the armrest of the couch he lay upon. Through blurry, tired and temporary short-sighted vision, the sole occupant of the apartment observes his surroundings, only able to make out vague shapes further off into the distance; an eccentric plant, a TV, a carpet with indiscernible patterns, and the only thing he could clearly make out; the bottle of Aspirins and a note pinned under it.

Out of curiosity and with much labor, Jim reaches for the note and grabs hold of it, bringing it up to his temporarily impaired vision for a closer, more discernible look. He huffs in frustration over his continuous impaired vision, blinking a couple of times which seemed to do the trick, though he was still temporarily short sighted. His minimally restored focus would suffice for the purpose of reading the contents of this note, which he commits to doing so:

“Just heading into work for the day.

Will call you to check how you’re going.

Call me if you need anything.

-Loona

P.S. Blitz says hi.”

Also listed below the main contents of this hastily written note in neat cursive was what could be assumed to be Loona’s number.

“I’m sure he did,” Jim says to himself in a slurred, croaky manner. He carefully folds the slip of paper once or twice in his hands, tucking it next to him to keep it safe and close.

Jim returns to a more comfortable position, slipping down slightly back into the couch with a strained grunt and intertwining his fingers together on his chest, focusing on recovering his state of health. This also gave him some time to think alone and freely which would allow the young man to process what had just happened to him.

Although Jim’s persistent headache continued and hindered his ability to think straight, he was able to remember a few things that had happened leading up to the pivotal moment:

A firm knock from the front door, almost commanding him to answer.

A group of unfamiliar men forcing their way inside his home, backing him into his living room.

A tense exchange of provocative and fiery words that Jim couldn’t quite remember.

Then the ringing out of gunshots to his abdomen, causing him to slump backwards to the floor.

A striking, almost paralyzing chill ran up Jim’s spine at the mere thought of what had happened, and how close he was to realizing his own fragile mortality. If anything, it was nothing short of miraculous that he apparently hadn’t been shot anywhere major to his greatest relief. In addition, it appeared as if his eyesight was slow but surely returning as it should be. The young man lets out a long sigh, thankful for this turn of positive luck, letting out the faintest smile despite it all. This moment of silently celebrating his turn of luck was short-lived when a more pressing question emerged.

Where exactly was he?

This question lingers within Jim’s mind as he begins properly observing his surroundings. His initial presumption was correct; this was indeed an apartment he had been brought to. His curiosity continued to grow as he also observed what looked to be a kitchen behind him to his left, as well as a small table to the left of the entrance door; sat upon it was a landline phone which had been hastily set up and a rather eccentric lamp.

The design of it piqued Jim's curiosity but was nothing compared to what was within his direct line of sight. What stood before him on the other side of the couch was a door; it was wrapped in a few bands of black-and-red hazard tape, as well as a sign which read "beware of the dog". His eyes moved up to the sign which hung above it all in crude writing; "Loona's Room".

The young man's eyes squint in perplexity at this prominent detail; "'Loona's roo-' huh??"

Something within Jim's thoughts exposes him to a very concerning realization. He freezes before darting his gaze back towards the general direction of the TV and the plant, causing him to have the biggest shock in his life; the aforementioned "eccentric plant" had faint green reptile-esque eyes seemingly growing out of its branches.

"Nah… no way… what the fresh hell is thi-.."

His eyes widened in bewilderment when he noticed the bizarre patterns on the carpet below him to his right; it had eyes and runes of a most foreboding origin, the sight of which began to stress him out, his headache returning because of the sight! On top of all this, behind the TV was a window with its retractable shutter-blinds drawn, and shining through the gap below was the faint hue of… of red…

At that very moment, like a truck hitting him at full force, that horrifying, blood-curdling realization hit him all at once; he knew right then and there exactly where he was.

All he could let out of his wide-eyed, sweating, and terrified state of shock was a single breathless exclamation; "Oh sweet mother of-!"

Moxxie wraps his impatient hand against the wall he leant against, growing exceedingly tired of having to wait for whatever antics Loona had caused once again. A solid two hours had passed since this whole dubious situation began and still no explanation had been provided, despite his persistent calls to get on to Blitz. Millie, meanwhile, kept watch for their arrival in the hallway to her own growing frustration.

“Are they here yet,” Moxxie calls suddenly out to his wife, this question having been asked at least half a dozen times within the past two hours.

“Nobody yet, Mox’,” Millie swiftly answers, yawning from boredom.

This was the fifth time Moxxie had heard this response, and frankly, he had grown tired to the point that it now angered him. He smashed his fist in frustration down hard on the receptionist’s desk and groaned in sheer frustration: “Damn it! What the fuck is taking so long!?”

“Calm now, dearie,” Millie tries to soothe her husband, coming over to rub his shoulders in order to ease his frustration; “It’s important that we stay calm, okay?”

“Stay calm? Stay calm!?” Moxxie groaned with a baffled look; “Honey, we need to work to make money! At the moment, we’re sitting around here while Blitz tries to tame that wretched bitch!”

Millie gasps at Moxxie’s sudden vulgarity; “Honey, language! Listen to yourself, you’re panicking. I agree with you entirely, Mox, but what can we do if she wants to play her stupid games?”

The male imp takes a deep breath before sighing, realizing that cooler heads needed to prevail; “..You’re right. I’m sorry, Millie, I just think that.. How much more do we have to deal with? We’ve got our own lives to lead! We don’t have time to wait for Loona to come to the little sense that she has!”

“I know, sweetie, I share your frustration,” Millie soothes by gently clasping his hands; “Just take some deep breaths, okay? I’m sure they’ll be back soon. We’ll be back in business soon enough.”

This assurance turned out to be truer than Millie ever intended as Blitz arrived no more than a minute later, clapping his hands in a commanding fashion to bring everyone together; “Right! Deepest apologies, M&M; Loonie-Tooney and I had to take care of some business with the dick-hole neighbors! Isn’t that right, Loonie?”

Loona snarls slightly at Blitz, rolling her eyes before begrudgingly affirming her father’s explanation; “Sure.”

Moxxie was the one to blurt out something impulsive as a response, obviously directed at the hellhound; “Took you long enough, didn’t it?”

It was obvious that Loona wasn’t going to take this snarky attitude from the imp, baring her teeth at him with a look at could kill; “Mind your own damn business, Moxxie. I swear, if you give me any crap about this.”

Unfortunately, Moxxie wasn’t going to let the persistent hellhound have the last word on the matter; “And why don’t I reserve the right to, hm? You give me the same crap almost every day!”

“Oh please,” Loona huffs with a more vicious sneer; “I don’t give it to people who don’t deserve it!”

“Okay, that’s enough!” Blitz interrupts this vicious spat between two complete opposites; “Now, can we get onto actually doing something today, please!”

The pair of hotheaded instigators of this sudden outburst stared into each other’s gazes in a moment extra of heated tension. It was only when Millie gently pulled Moxxie away from the scene of the argument did the work-day finally begin. The group made their way into the meeting room to discuss another client that had been put on hold for a while, though the client in question was willing to pay a hefty sum if the job was done correctly.

As usual, Blitz dictated the details “kindly” handed to him by Loona from the list of files they had stuffed away in a compartment. This particular case was a middle-aged woman who had committed some especially heinous crimes over decades upon decades involving, but not limited to, forgery, intimidation tactics, and in the most extreme cases, life-ruining conspiracy. It was agreed with everyone in the room, except Loona who was preoccupied with the contents of her phone, that this latest contract was definitely deserving of a good “visit”.

After the daily briefing, the usual process that IMP had grown accustomed to followed; a portal is opened using the Grimoire to who-knows-where for the task at hand while Loona, as having the bland duty of ‘receptionist’, stays behind, usually to her relief. Millie and Moxxie lead the charge for a change while Blitz stayed behind for a few seconds to talk briefly to his daughter; “No funny business, okay? Remember, if anything happens here, it’s your responsibility,” he states firmly to Loona while the hellhound groaned at this repetitive lecturing.

“Got it,” Loona tiredly acknowledges, obviously sick of hearing it.

Blitz sighed for a moment, shaking his head in a defeated way before turning his attention to the task at hand, running through the portal before it immediately closes. Once again, as per usual, the hellhound receptionist was alone to her own devices. She pulls out her phone before making her way back to the desk to “tend” to her duties. Although she was preoccupied with the mind-numbing content on her phone and the headache-inducing documentation on the computer, the addition to the responsibility personified back in the apartment lingered in her mind.

Loona couldn’t help but briefly wonder if he would persevere, if that “dumb hick” had taken her order to “not give up on her” seriously. Soon she realized how big of a responsibility she had put upon herself via the verbal contract she had made with Blitz before they left for work.

Her adoptive father’s words played through her mind like an authoritative echo, like a command she needed to abide to by mandate:

“All responsibility for that… THING on the couch is entirely on you!”

Loona sneers at just how scolding Blitz had sounded; “Wow. Thanks for the help, dad,” she mumbles to herself.

The sound of the phone blaring next to her startled the hellhound out of her train of thought, the ringtone echoing throughout the large space around her. Loona stares down at it with a cold indifference before mindlessly picking it up, expecting the same-old process of booking an appointment for whatever vengeful moron happened to require their below sub-par services.

It rings for a couple more seconds before the receptionist finally picks it up, allowing herself to blandly humor this caller; “Immediate Murder Professionals, what do you want?”

“You know exactly what I’m after.”

An eerily familiar voice reverberates through the receiver, echoing into her ear with that familiar foreboding and monotone buzz. Loona’s ears pricked up suddenly, her eyes widening as she recognised the voice; that damned anonymous tipper from the day or so prior.

An uncomfortable lump in her throat forms that she swallows away to allow herself to answer, trying to keep her composure; “Uh, yeah. Yeah I do, don’t worry, we’re getting onto your contract as soon as we can. It will take a few days at the very least, so be patient with us, capiche?”

Initially, there is an uncomfortable silence on the other end of the line, the faint static of the phone-line filling in what little noise there was. That was until the voice spoke; “You better be quick-smart about it; there is money on the line, after all.”

“Uh-huh, that’s usually how it works, genius,” Loona quips back in return; “What do you want, a gold star for your observation?”

“I just need the job done,” the croaky monotone voice half-mumbles on the other end of the line, almost sounding slurred; “If it’s not complete, then unfortunately.. there will be a.. lot more than money on the line.”

The IMP receptionist felt her tempers begin to rise; “I’m sorry, are you.. threatening us? Are you trying to test me, is that it?”

The caller chuckles in a haunting kind of way; “All in good time-”

“No! Fuck that bullshit talk, buddy,” Loona quickly snaps, slamming her fist against the desk; “What game are you playing here? You better tell me right this second, or otherwise I’m going to come over there and shove that phone all the way up your ass!”

For whatever reason, the anonymous tipper found this outburst rather amusing, giving off a hearty, foreboding chuckle; “Watch that temper of yours, girlie; you don’t want to make any miscalculations, do you?”

“How about go sit on a dick, huh?” By this point, Loona’s already short patience for practically anything had just run out.

The lack of immediate response told her that this remark had stumped him from making any further comment. It was only after the anonymous tipper grunted did he finally speak; “You have a day, no more than that,” he ominously announces before the call is hung up.

Loona holds her free hand over her eyes and forehead while she abruptly hangs up the phone, groaning with frustration to an increasingly stressful situation. That intrusive thought within the back of her mind rebounded and made its ugly presence known: “Was sheltering that “hillbilly” going to be all that worth it, especially when it brings needless trouble like this?” The hellhound winces at this thought before promptly telling it to “fuck off”, knowing full well that this wasn’t the right way to think; even with how unapologetically surly and indifferent she was, she had some standards to go by… at least, somewhere within that rough, stern exterior.

Out of nowhere, another phone call is received, this time being from her own phone, resting screen-down on the desk. It buzzed loudly, practically begging to be answered by the receptionist who was staring at it with hesitation. It was only when Loona finally flipped the phone over did she realize who was calling; it was that familiar number from the landline they hardly used.

Her ears perk up with immediate attention, finally making the move to answer the call. Loona presses her screen to answer before moving the phone up to her ear; “Uh, hello?”

A hushed, panicked masculine voice emanates from the other end of the call; “You better tell me right at this fucking second where you’ve ended up taking me!”

It was pretty obvious who it was that was growling on the other end of the line, prompting Loona to squirm a little, trying to think of a way to soothe his worries, even if it seemed like an impossible task; “Oh shit, Jim! You, uh, you doing okay over there-”

“No I am not fucking okay, Loona! Where in the absolute balls have you taken me? What is this damn place?”

Loona rubs the back of her neck, inhaling through her teeth and trying to think of a “reasonable” explanation; “Uhhh… Ah fuck, uhh… how do I put this mildly to you?”

Jim stutters on the other end of the line, quite obviously not taking this well; “Wh-What? What’s that supposed to mean? Dammit, where am I!”

“Hang on! Just calm down and let me explain something to you,” Loona sternly orders, still debating with herself on whether she should tell him the truth at the moment to save his state of

mind; “At the moment, I’m at work, okay? I can’t leave until the others get back, so I’ll need you to hang in there until I return; I won’t be long.”

The young man is left speechless for a moment on the other end of the line, his thought process obviously in a complete mess and trying to figure out everything at once; “At work? Oh, so you’ve just left me all alone here with no sodding idea as to where I am? Righto, I see how it is!”

Loona huffs loudly, trying her hardest to ease the situation at least temporarily; “It isn’t like whatever you’re thinking! I was going to stay, but Blitz forced me to go with him! I mean, come on, you KNOW how impossible he is to negotiate with!”

“Right. I see,” Jim sarcastically replies; “So where the hell am I? You still haven’t answered my bloody question.”

The hellhound freezes, thinking on what to say that would sound remotely believable.

“Loona? Loona! For shit sakes, just tell me where I-”

“You’re at home! You’re in my apartment, okay? Wherever you think you are, it’s definitely not that,” Loona hastily replies, cringing at just how unbelievable and lousy of a response it was - she had told more convincing lies to Blitz when she snuck out to parties.

“I know. I guessed that by the sign to your room,” Jim replies with a scoff on the other end of the line; “But where is your apartment? Mate, c’mon; I’m not stupid.”

“...Look. I just need you to stay calm. I’ll explain it all to you as soon as I get back, alright? Just, like, rest and let yourself heal,” Loona instructs as if what she was saying was a mandate.

Despite the receptionist’s plea, Jim continues to adamantly protest; “Are you going to tell me where I am or-”

“For fuck sakes, can you just do what I say!? I’m doing all I can to damn-well help you, and all you’re doing is making it difficult!”

The sudden frustrated outburst from Loona caused Jim to fall silent on the other end of the line. It was no secret that she had a firebrand temper that could scorch anyone, but to witness it himself once again was always intimidating. Loona hears the caller let out a defeated huff before speaking once more, this time in a temporarily calmer fashion; “Not like I have much of a choice, aye?”

“Thank you,” Loona huffs, relieved that small progress was being made to calm the situation; “Just hang in there and don’t do anything stupid; you’re safe, I promise.”

“Ah shit, gonna have to take your word for it,” Jim groans on the other end, perhaps feeling his wounds ache.

“You better, for your own sake,” Loona affirms, looking back towards the computer monitor; “Call me if you need anything, I gotta get back to work.”

“Got it.. I can’t believe this,” Jim mumbles to himself before abruptly hanging up the call from his end. The monotone buzz which signaled that the call had ended rang in the receptionist’s ear.

Loona lets out a heavy sigh, placing her phone screen-up on the desk and turning her full attention back towards the computer monitor which was shining in her face. Was she actually going to do anything productive with the documents displayed on the screen? Highly unlikely, though figured she might as well put in, at the very least, some minimal effort.

While she “worked”, the receptionist couldn’t help but feel a foreign feeling of slight guilt sitting in the back of her mind; it wasn’t her intention to lose her temper like that, but she had to get the message across to that man somehow! In reaction to this thought and the lingering feeling of slight guilt, a part of her wondered if she had gone soft.

A blaring ringtone startles Loona immediately out of her slumber, causing her to practically fall out of her chair and nearly smack her head against the back wall. She quickly focuses her gaze towards the phone, realizing that it was Blitz calling, most likely to order her to come pick them up. It was when she checked the time did Loona realize that she had fallen asleep unwillingly while sifting through case-files and scam Emails.

With a tired grunt, Loona finally answers the call after a couple of rings; “Yeah, what?”

“Hey, Loonie! Come pick us up pleeease,” Blitz’s cheerful sing-song voice pipes up from the other end of the call.

“Yeah yeah, I know the drill,” Loona obliges, picking up the grimoire and summoning a portal in the middle of the room, allowing for the rest of the team to make their way back home. Moxxie is the first to stumble through, almost falling face first onto the floor before regaining his footing at the last second; this time, however, the marksman seemed to have come out of this job unscathed.

Upon seeing Moxxie nearly plummeting face-first into the floor, Loona couldn’t help but smirk with a teasing-grin; “Hah! You alright there, little man?”

Moxxie growls a little with a light hiss; “Nnngh! I’m fine, thank you very much.”

Loona continues to smirk while raising her eyebrow; “You sure? ‘Cause it looks like you almost ate shit and fell there. Finally losing your composure, huh?”

“Hey! At least I put in effort into my work,” Moxxie hisses right back.

“You better shut your yap, Loona,” Millie sternly scolds with a look which startled the receptionist. Perhaps wisely, Loona chose to cease her daily torment aimed consistently at Moxxie, that dead-eye look given by Millie unsettling her.

Blitz intervenes in this brief, unneeded argument to ease the sudden tension; “Great work today, M&M, great fucking work! Your shots however, Moxxie, well… they’re getting sloppy, that’s to say the least.”

“That’s what she said,” Loona comments in the background with a grinning snicker.

Moxxie appeared baffled at this mean-spirited accusation; “And how were we supposed to expect that she would have company, sir!? It’s not as if we had any proper insight into specific details AS USUAL! Isn’t that right, Loona?”

Loona chooses not to answer verbally, instead resorting to intensely scowling at Moxxie's scolding demeanor.

"Dammit, Moxxie, lay off my Loonie! She tries her hardest everyday, and you know it," an automatically defensive Blitz corrects his shorter-in-stature employee.

"The only thing I know, sir, is that Loona here has called us drama all morning," Moxxie stubbornly retorts; "The concept of responsibility is completely foreign to her!"

Blitz dismisses this sudden critique of his adoptive daughter's work-ethic with a hand gesture and a scoff; "Oh, spare us the lecture, Mox! Loonie here is very familiar with the concept of bearing responsibility; besides, she's brought home a new human pet and everything!"

Moxxie rolls his eyes at the "example" given with regards to the hellhound's sense of responsibility; "With all due respect, sir; working in a company is VASTLY different than looking after a… wait, did you say a human?"

The initial "proud dad" expression on Blitz's face turns into one that reflects the sudden realization of what he had accidentally let slip. He turns around to see Loona's piercing dead-eye look practically scolding him, the hellhound in utter speechless disbelief that he would even think of breaking the secret.

Blitz turns back around, his eyes shifting to think of something to say; "Uh… Loonie, you can explain."

Loona snaps out of her stunned gaze; "What!?"

"You brought him here, so he's your responsibility, remember," Blitz states firmly to Loona's utter displeasure that she had been put on the spot.

Millie and Moxxie looked on in curious bewilderment, still waiting for a proper, insightful explanation. All eyes were practically glued on the hellhound receptionist, waiting for the much anticipated information dump.

Initially, Loona stands there, lost on what to say before finally caving and begrudgingly spilled what was supposed to be a secret; “I… I don’t… AAAAGH! Alright, FINE! Dammit, I hate you all! Look - he saved my life, so I ended up saving his own this morning; That’s all you pair of dumbasses need to know!”

Blitz seems unsatisfied with this explanation; “Aaaaand?”

Loona seemed almost incredulous; “W-what do you mean ‘And’? That’s all there is to it, I swear!”

Millie was the one to butt in with her own observational thoughts; “What part of you thought that bringing whoever this HUMAN is home with you was a good idea!?”

The hellhound sneers in response to this sudden interrogation; “I don’t know! I guess because he did the same for me, I felt obligated to return the favor? I don’t fucking know! All I know is that we were supposed to kill him!”

This sudden revelation perplexed both Millie and Moxxie even further! Moxxie, however, was the one to voice his confusion; “What now!? So you bought him here to kill him?”

Loona gives herself a facepalm; “Oh for- No, dumbass! I bought him here to give him refuge; I literally just explained this!”

The next interjection came from Blitz; “Did I mention I also met him once? He’s an alright meat-bag compared to the rest of them.”

After much thought, something within Moxxie’s head suddenly clicked, the dots finally connecting; “…Wait… Is this the Australian guy that found Loona we’re talking about?”

“Wow! Look who finally pulled their head out of their ass and listened,” Loona remarks in a rather insulting and condescending fashion.

“What are we supposed to do with this guy? Hold onto him forever, or what,” Millie asks perhaps the most sensible question out of all of them.

“Who said you’re going to be doing anything? I’m taking the responsibility,” the hellhound almost instantly corrects.

“That would be a wonderful change,” Moxxie comments with an eye-roll.

This snide remark really sent Loona off; “Ohhh- I swear you little motherfucker, I’m going to tear out your-”

“THAT’S ENOUGH!” Blitz’s voice boomed over the argumentative duo in front of him, startling everyone else within the room; “Look, it’s the end of the day, we’ll sort all this shit out tomorrow! We’ll regroup tomorrow morning and figure out what-in-the-fuck to do, and try to get through the day as normal! Is everyone on the same page?”

Everyone within the room agreed on the proposal; it was the only practical solution being offered, after all. Small utterances of baffled muttering emanated from Millie and Moxxie as they left for home, leaving their boss and his daughter behind. Unlike seconds before, they both got to work to retrieve everything they needed in an uneasy silence, the room tense with the thought of having to deal with this strange situation head on.

“I still can’t believe you’d put this upon me, Loonie; it’s beyond absurd,” Blitz muttered as they finally left the headquarters.

Despite that unneeded comment, Loona chose to ignore it, looking straight ahead with a poker face as the elevator doors finally opened, allowing for them to enter inside.

The Burdens of Responsibility

The tension within the air was almost nauseating as Loona and Blitz wander back to their apartment, the light of day beginning to diminish. Although no words were spoken on the way back, it was obvious to Loona that everything that happened from here on would be largely, if not entirely, on her. This foreign concept of serious responsibility put her in an uncomfortable position; one which she just had to begrudgingly accept, despite her best protests. Loona follows behind Blitz with the poker face that had largely been maintained since they left the office, as well as continuing the silent treatment she was giving her father. Blitz was in similar spirits, a blank expression sitting firmly on his face almost as if it was a permanent fixture. They both knew that, one way or another, there was no preventing the almost inevitable drama that would soon occur.

The long walk towards their apartment felt like a long, silent, grueling eternity, the familiar gloominess of the hallway almost mocking them in its own inanimate fashion. Loona prepares herself to unlock the door to the apartment by grabbing the keys off of Blitz, practically being his servant for the time being. She grabs the keychain from Blitz's hand and proceeds to pull away, only for the motion to be interrupted as her father stops dead in his tracks, his grip on the keychain firmly maintained.

Before Loona could ask what Blitz was doing, he answers the question for her by simply stating; "Remember, sweetie; the responsibility is entirely on you. You want to keep his ass here? YOU look after him, I'm not helping you."

Loona rolls her eyes as she lets out a low, guttural groan before finally taking the keychain out of Blitz's firm grip with a yank; "As if I don't already know this."

Quietly, Loona inserts the key into the lock before twisting it clockwise, the noise of the door being unlocked slightly echoed through the hallway where they stood. Loona sighs, muttering something along the lines of "here we go…" before finally allowing the door to swing open.

Both residents of this apartment prepared themselves on what they were to find, but sure enough they found the "human pet", as so flatteringly described by the ever-so-sensitive Blitz, sitting on the couch in a hunched over position, his head buried in his hands as his back faced them. Despite the creaking of the door hinges moving, Jim didn't seem to react to it, merely staying completely still within his seated position. This raised suspicion for Loona and Blitz, curious as to why he wasn't reacting to their arrival.

It was Loona who decided to break the silence as she slowly approached the couch the young man sat on, trying to get his attention; “Uh.. Jim?”

She suddenly gets a fright as Jim quickly snaps his head towards her general direction, pivoting himself on the couch. His face wore an intense, wide-eyed, ferocious look of anger and fear at the same time. There was something so terrifying about how the maimed young man seemed to glare at Loona, Blitz observing this with caution while he prepared himself to protect his daughter just in case.

Despite being taken aback at Jim’s quite evident rage, the hellhound decides to force herself to speak; “You-uh.. you doing okay he-”

“This is hell, isn’t it?”

Loona suddenly freezes, trying to think of what to say. Jim’s words weren’t phrased as a question either, like he already knew the answer before she even had the chance to say it. Perhaps quite foolishly, the hellhound obliges to this “question” by answering with perhaps the dumbest answer she’s ever spoken; “How do you know?”

Jim’s mouth swung agape, his brow furrowed as if he had just been insulted; “Because I’m not fucking stupid, that’s why! It’s pretty flaming obvious! You’re a hellhound, a HELLhound! And over there is your bloody room! So, you know, I put two and two together and I decided that you’re pissing me off!”

Loona reacted in a rather baffled manner; “What? And I am pissing you off HOW exactly?”

Jim scowled deeper in an incredulous fashion, acting as if it was the most obvious answer in existence; “By dragging me down here! You call this fucking place “safe”!? For ME!? I’ve been shot multiple times in the bloody abdomen and I’ve nearly died, and you decide in your infinite wisdom to-… AM I FUCKING DEAD!?”

“Can you lower your damn voice, please!?” Loona pleads, trying her hardest to snap Jim out of his growing panic; “Just stay calm and let me explain-”

“I KNEW IT! I-I should’ve fucking known! I’ve died and you’ve damned my soul down to this fucking pit!”

Loona became quite stunned, almost insulted by the assumption; “You don’t know anything yet! Wait a second, let me-”

“I should’ve fucking known this would happen, that you would damn me! Color me the idiot, huh!? This is what I get for sheltering the likes of you in my own-”

WHACK!

Jim’s panicked ranting is abruptly cut off with a forceful slap to the face from Loona, shutting him up almost instantly while his ears rang painfully from the force! He flinches in pain for a couple of seconds, trying to regather his thoughts before finally exclaiming; “The fuck was that for!?”

“To get you to cut the bullshit,” Loona states firmly; “Now listen to me or I’ll do it again; You’re not dead! You’re still alive, so don’t hyperventilate, got it? And no, before you ask, I haven’t put a curse on you, or damned you for eternity down here or any of that kinda crap!”

“Then why the fuck am I down here, hey!” Jim bellows, his ears still aching from Loona’s rather ferocious open-palmed “wake-up call”.

“So you wouldn’t die! If I didn’t haul your ass here to get you what you needed, then you WOULD be dead,” Loona yells right back, obviously not appreciating being sworn at after her efforts.

“..That right, hey? Right, I-I see,” Jim exhales in a nervous manner, his nerves shot from the sudden shock of realization where he was; “I appreciate that, but seriously, down here!? I-I don’t deserve to be down here, do I?”

“Hey, asshole! My Loonie just explained why your sorry self is here,” Blitz intervenes from the background, to the annoyance of the hellhound; he had just entered the kitchen to fetch himself something to eat.

Jim groans loudly, the painful realization of who else was here hitting him; “Oh, look who it is! Great to see you, ya dolt!”

“Oh, blow me, Jim-boy,” Blitz vehemently retorts; “You’re lucky that you’re even here in the first place! If it was my choice, I woulda shot you alre-”

“BLITZ,” Loona shouts across the room to the kitchen, a fierce snarl baring her teeth.

Despite his daughter’s sudden vocal protest on his comment, the clearly arrogant imp doubled down on his comments; “What! I’m only telling him how it is! Why should I sugarcoat my feelings to this grown-ass man?”

Loona merely shook her head in utter disbelief, completely baffled yet still hardly surprised that Blitz would make such an insensitive comment of this volume. Nonetheless, she decided to move this beyond ridiculous argument along: “Alright, enough bitching! It’s starting to give me a headache.”

“Gladly,” Jim growled, shooting Blitz a fierce and piercing glare, though the imp’s appearance still unsettled him; “… Shit, where do we go from here?”

Blitz rolls his eyes, folding his arms as he exits the confines of the kitchen; “I suppose, seeming that Loonie here wants to keep you as a pet-”

Loona is quick to refute this accusation; “I do NOT!”

The arrogant imp continues his observation; “I suppose we start… ugh, I can’t believe I’m saying this shit, but.. I suppose we have to accommodate for you,” Blitz concedes, practically forcing the last words out with much hesitation to say it.

“So I’m here for the long run, hey,” Jim guessed in a rather pessimistic tone of voice, his hopes faded since his ordeal hours earlier.

“I hope not,” Blitz groans at the mere thought and possibility; “But let it be known that I’m not negotiating! Everything with regards to accommodation, you take up with Loonie-Toonie over there. Isn’t that right, sweetie?”

Loona sneers at Blitz’s complete lack of empathy in this situation; “I guess so.”

Jim gives off a heaving sigh, coughing a little as his wounds continue to ache, his morale completely diminished and tarnished, much like his blue buttoned-up shirt which was stained a dark-crimson red around his abdomen. He slumps back down onto the couch in defeat, his eyes gazing up at the ceiling in utter hopelessness. It was no secret to anybody within the room, though probably except for Blitz because of his ignorance, that this day had been exceptionally taxing on the young man’s mental and physical health, and much rest was definitely needed.

The coldly uncompromising imp takes this as a wonderful opportunity to affirm who was boss; “For your info, Jim-boy, you’re NOT sleeping on MY couch!”

Without fixing his gaze away from the ceiling, Jim responds in a monotone voice, void of hope; “Where am I supposed to go then?”

Blitz turns his gaze towards Loona for that answer; “Loonie?”

The hellhound widened her eyes; “Come on, Blitz, can he sleep out here somewhere?”

“Where? On the floor? Sorry, Loonie, as we agreed; the solution is your responsibility.”

Loona immediately knew what the obvious answer was, and in all honesty, she despised the idea with such ferocious resentment for it. Despite her obvious reservations with the idea, the hellhound sighs as she rubbed her brow between her eyes, mumbling something before letting out a guttural groan: “Welp, shit. I guess you’re… guess you’re with me, Jim. NOT in my bed, obviously; I’m pretty sure there’s a spare mattress somewhere in here.”

Jim was equally as astonished, if not baffled, at this rather eccentric solution, but then again, what other choice did he have? Although it seemed invasive of what was obviously Loona’s own personal area, both human and hellhound knew it was the only viable solution.

Blitz, meanwhile, had other opinions; “What!? Nuh-uh! No! BIG red flag, you filthy hillbilly! There’s no way you’re snoozing in there!”

Loona scoffs at Blitz’s sudden reservation; “What do you want me to do? There’s no chance you’re going to let him sleep anywhere else in here! Unless you have a better solution, it’s best that you shut up and put up with it, like I have to!”

A further word of protest was about to escape Blitz’s mouth before he caught himself in hesitation, knowing that, once again, his daughter was correct. Albeit with deep reservations about the idea, the imp gave his verdict on the matter:

“Fine! Alright, sure! You have my.. express permission to reside there. Here’s the deal, though; if you try anything funny with my Loonie-Tooney, buddy-pal, I will absolutely tear your vocal cords out, so I won’t have to listen to your screams when I slit your throat! Have I made myself clear?”

With a pained heave, Jim lifts his head back up to face Blitz who was now hunched over him as he continued to sit in the imp’s couch. He musters a dead-eyed look to glare at the imp in response before answering; “Maybe if you asked that bit nicer, I’d be more-”

“Just say a simple ‘yes’, you idiot,” Loona advises in the background who was scrolling through her phone while the “negotiation” process continued.

Jim does exactly what the hellhound advises, which seemed to slightly please Blitz in front of him, the paternal imp moving away from the young man’s current location, though still side-eyeing the human while making his way back to the kitchen. Loona rolls her eyes with a guttural sigh to her father’s utter impulsive intimidation tactics as she returns to the confines of her room, leaving the wounded casualty to his own devices, allowing him time to process what was, hopefully, his temporary situation. He looks down at his clasped hands, uneasily gazing at his intertwined fingers while his right leg bounced in what was obviously a nervous twitch.

Jim began to feel himself disassociating, his mind beginning to numb while his exhausted eyes focused on his hands towards the floor, all the while a slight hint of muffled tinnitus began to plague his hearing. It began to feel like an eternity, how long he waited, every passing second he stayed in that damned “pit” feeling like an entire minute. Amidst the persistent dissociating tinnitus ringing in his ears, the steady pulsations of his heart-rate reverberated throughout his body, exacerbated by his disorientation. A blank expression sat unwavering on his face while he remained

thoughtless, feeling that he was truly nowhere, but merely existed. Somewhere off into the distance behind him, a muffled voice called out, trying to get him to snap out of his current frame of mind.

It was only when Jim felt a firm shove on his left shoulder did he finally snap out of this disorientated, shellshock-like state. He hesitantly pivots his head to his left, his eyes meeting with Loona's own slightly-concerned stare.

The hellhound repeated her question; "You okay?"

"... Yeah. Yeah, I'm alright," Jim mumbles, finally fully snapping himself out of his dissociation as the awful deafening tinnitus faded quickly away.

"You better not be lying," Loona calmly yet firmly states.

"I'm not," Jim mumbles back in return; "Just need to process it all."

Loona nods in acknowledgement; "Hm. Just letting you know that there's a mattress in my room for you. It's a little small, but it'll work."

The human merely gives off a monotone hum in acknowledgement of this fact, giving a weak thumbs up before staring back down towards the ground. The sound of Blitz mumbling to himself in the background while seemingly filling out paperwork filled the space around him, Loona since returned to her room to keep herself occupied as ambient noises from all around accompanied the uneasy silence.

A small utterance left Jim's lips while he thought with a tense, anxious fixation about his position; "Oh, help me…"

"You coming to bed, hon?"

“Two more minutes, dear!”

“You’ve been saying that for the past ten minutes! You’ll burn yourself out, MoxMox.”

“Eh, maybe you’re right.”

Back in their own respective apartment, Moxxie had retired to the living room’s couch, invested his hobby of analyzing and writing sheets of his own original music, carefully strumming his guitar to test which notes sounded best. The imp usually retired to this niche passion of his whenever he felt overwhelmed, helping him overcome his anxiety attacks after each workday; If there was anything else that soothed him and sourced him great comfort besides Millie, it was his love for musical composure. On occasion, Moxxie would unknowingly find himself over-indulging in this pass-time, sometimes staying up into the small hours of the morning to Millie’s dismay; this evening, she was determined to drag him to bed with her.

With a small frown on her lips, Millie tugs on Moxxie’s arm to forcefully pull him off the couch; “C’mon, Mox. I’m not joking now.”

Moxxie sighs a little as he continues to hyperfixate on his writing, crossing out off notes and replacing them with improvements; “I know you’re not, Mills; let me just-”

“Nope! I don’t wanna hear it tonight. You’re coming with me,” Millie pouts, suddenly jolting her husband out of his seat before promptly swinging him over her shoulder.

“Woah- Hey! Millie!” Moxxie tries to protest, though his efforts are fruitless as Millie proceeds to carry him over her shoulder all the way back to their bed. In a bridal-like fashion, Millie proceeds to throw Moxxie under the covers and tuck him in forcefully, getting right into bed with him with a flirtatious look about her face.

“Now, you’re going to stay here like a good boy! I’m not asking, I’m telling. And no buts about it, y’hear?” Millie giggles, giving him a couple of pecks on the cheek which turn her husband immediately into a flustered mess.

“Eheh.. I wouldn’t dare defy you,” Moxxie smiles warmly as he yawns, feeling himself drifting off to sleep slowly but surely.

“But you did, MoxMox!” Millie begins to pout, putting on a fake sad-face; “Why would you rebel against me like that~?”

“Because I’m some sort of idiot,” Moxxie replies with a bit of self-deprecating humor.

“No you’re not. You’re not just any idiot,” Millie refutes, giving him another small peck on the lips; “You’re MY idiot. Best we get some sleep now, ‘kay hon?”

The male imp softly smiles, his white freckles wrinkling; “That’s probably the best idea I’ve heard all day. Goodnight, honey.”

“Mmm.. ‘night~,” Millie quietly mumbles, slipping down under the covers, deciding to huddle up next to her husband. Moxxie returns the favor by gently tucking his arm around the back of her head, almost cradling her. It was the small moments like this that made all the struggles of day-to-day life all worthwhile for the pair of imps now resting soundly in their bed, daring not to move. Without a moment’s more thought, they both in unison fell into the comfort of sleep.

…

Knock! Knock! Knock!

Moxxie is rudely awoken to the sound of someone knocking on the front door. He opens his exhausted eyes slowly, blinking a couple of times to regather his focus, looking towards the general direction of their apartment’s front door. Moxxie glances to his right, noticing that Millie hadn't awoken to the sudden reverberating noise, making him wonder if it was just some trick of his tired mind. It was only when another knock on the door rang out was this theory proven wrong.

So as not to wake up Millie who was already fast asleep next to him, Moxxie moves silently out of bed, being ever careful not to create noise as his feet finally make contact with the floor. With caution, Moxxie tiredly waltzes his way through the dark out of the bedroom, heading towards the entrance of their apartment, feeling his way through the dark and turning on the light in the living

room just in case he tripped. Continuing his cautious approach to this mysterious visitor in the late hours of the evening, the tired imp makes the final approach to the entrance, preparing himself to turn the handle and greet whoever was there.

Just as Moxxie was about to grab hold of the door handle, he hesitates, a word appearing within his thoughts which struck him:

Wrong. Something was very wrong.

He couldn't quite pinpoint what exactly was wrong, but even before he made his way to answer whoever was present, there was this eerie feeling hanging in the air which could be described as foreboding. There was something about the time the knocking had occurred, how echoing and distant it sounded; whoever had knocked most likely didn't have positive intentions, that much Moxxie was almost certain. Nonetheless, there was only one way he'd find out if anyone was on the opposite side. The imp lets out a soft exhale to calm himself before carefully moving his eye up to the peephole in the door.

…

It was his father.

Moxxie instantly felt a deep void form within his stomach, his fearsome heart sinking deeper than it had ever sunk before, a wave of intense fear rushing over him! What was his father doing here? How did he find him? What did he want? A million fearful questions ran through the imp's head as he continued to stare fearfully at his father who was standing there with a cold and emotionless expression. The longer Moxxie stares, the more his legs become uneasy and weak, almost threatening to collapse under his weight.

After what felt like an eternity, his father suddenly gave off an unnaturally wide grin, holding this beyond menacing smirk for at least ten more seconds before finally speaking to the occupant of this apartment:

"What's the matter, beard? Don't you want to greet your old man?"

What happened next was beyond Moxxie's comprehension…

Crim's smile grew wider than ever thought possible, more teeth than he ever had the right to have appearing as his face began to malform into something beyond uncanny! Moxxie watched in absolute horror through the peephole as his father's eyes began sinking back into his head and eventually dissolving, his skull structure becoming an incomprehensible crude abomination! The mob boss' skin hung off his wretched face in a horrific way, stretching down like thick tar as blood-curdling, animalistic screams and grunts emanated from a deformed gaping hole which was formerly his mouth!

"Let me in, you little ungrateful bastard! LET ME IN!"

Moxxie wheezed in terror, terribly short of breath as he fell right onto his back, desperately retreating from the front door in fear for his own life! The sound of his father's guttural bellowing echoed from the other side as he pounded his fists hard against the door, desperately trying to reach his son! A deafening, oppressive tinnitus filled Moxxie's ears, drowning out his father's animalistic screams from outside all the while the beyond hysterical imp held his head in his quivering hands, begging desperately for whatever this was to go away!

It was all too much!

Someone make it go away!

MAKE IT GO AWAY-

"MOXXIE!"

As suddenly as the ordeal began, it stopped to the sound of a roaring feminine voice from behind him! Moxxie freezes, darting his head towards the source of the voice standing in the living room; it was Millie, in her pajamas, looking directly at him with a look of deep concern. Moxxie stuttered through his bated breath, trying to mutter any form of a sentence with little success, staring at his only source of true safety and comfort with small tears in his eyes.

Millie rushes over to her clearly anguished and distressed husband, sliding down onto her knees before gripping onto both of his shoulders firmly: "Mox, what's wrong with you? You started screaming!"

Moxxie doesn't answer right away, though after finally gathering remnants of his composure, he nervously points towards the door with a shaking, hesitant hand, obviously unable to speak in his petrified state.

Millie darts her gaze towards the front door before immediately sprinting up to it, getting herself ready to furiously confront whoever was on the other side for scaring her husband, only to find… nothing. There was nobody there, or any evidence that anyone was there in the first place. She looks down both ends of the hallway, scanning the darkness intensely, confirming again that they were alone. Millie sighs to release the sudden rush of adrenaline, gently closing the door and locking it before turning back around to face Moxxie, still huddled fearfully with his back against the wall.

With care, Millie sits down on her knees in front of her husband in a bid to calm him down, gently placing her hand on his lap with a look of reassurance in her eyes; she had done this many times with Moxxie in the past, and most times it did work; "There's nobody there, Mox, don't worry."

"B… B-but there.. T-there was," Moxxie stammers, trying his best to force out a reply.

"Who was it," Millie softly asks, gently rubbing her free hand up and down his arm, the dull feeling of her claws managing to soothe her husband.

"...D… Dad… he was.. His face, it… it was all… he was there..," Moxxie manages to explain with what little courage he had left after the ordeal.

Millie's irises turn red for a moment, signaling the sheer fury she felt at the very mention of Crim; that rotten, filthy, vermin-like son-of-a-whore. She thought about returning back into the hallway to pursue the most unwelcome visitor, if there ever was one, but decided against it; her priority was Moxxie, and Moxxie only. She exhales, smiling softly to reassure her husband that everything would be okay.

"I think you just have had a night terror, dear," Millie soothingly suggests with a gentle, maternal tone to her voice.

Moxxie turns his gaze back towards the door, staring at it with a hint of fear from the bizarre event he had witnessed, before turning his eyes back towards Millie, exhaling in relief with a quivering

smile; “...Y-yeah… hah… yeah, I-I think I did… haha…”

Millie reaches out her hand towards her husband, careful not to make any sudden movements that may spook him; “You wanna come back to bed? It’s nice and warm there.”

“…That sounds like a plan,” Moxxie concedes before weakly grabbing hold of his wife’s firm hand, her grip tightening as she lifts him up back into his feet; “I-I’m sorry, Millie, I-”

“Sh! Hey, none of that ‘sorry’ business, okay? You can’t help what you dream about,” Millie affirms, holding him close with her arm around his back; “Besides, if that piece-of-shit ever does dare to come over here and harm you in any way, I’ll tear out his heart and butcher him until there’s nothing left.”

Considering these words, Moxxie turns his tired eyes back towards the front door behind him, that ominous feeling still hanging about. To him, it didn’t feel much like a dream, as if whatever or whoever was outside was truly there - then again, most night terrors did feel that way. With a weakened nod, Moxxie lightly smiles; “Thanks, honey.”

Millie says nothing, instead ruffling her husband’s bed-head hair with a light-hearted smirk, leading the charge back into the bedroom. Just before she enters back through the doorway and towards their bed, she freezes suddenly before turning back towards the front door, her brow furrowed.

Moxxie immediately notices his wife’s sudden analyzing glare, a feeling of foreboding beginning to creep back into his mind; “What’s wrong?”

“…Nothing. It’s nothing,” Millie softly replies with a reassuring look in her eyes, perhaps trying to shove away whatever had made her react.

What Millie had heard was something she deemed near impossible, dismissing it as merely her exhausted mind drifting away and calling for her to finally return to sleep; it sounded exactly as if a voice had just called out her name in a harsh, raspy, barely audible whisper from behind the front door. The more she thought about it, she realized that it sounded like her father.

There was one word that kept playing on repeat in Millie’s mind as she drifted back off to sleep:

Wrong.

Something was so incredibly wrong.

Loona couldn't sleep.

It didn't matter how hard she tried or how frequently she shuffled under the sheets in a bid to get comfortable enough, it seemed that her body decided that it had enough energy to stay awake, at least for the moment. A part of her guessed that the Power Nap she had at work must've interrupted her sleep schedule, which tended to happen more often than she openly admitted.

To pass the time in these late hours of the evening until the inevitable desire to sleep finally returned, Loona quietly picks up her phone from the bedside table. She turns it on, the glare of the sudden burst of light straining her eyes, finding out that it was a few minutes past midnight. She grunts in a monotone way, sitting upright in her bed before beginning to scroll through her phone for something remotely interesting to look at. It took her a minute, but soon she realized that she wasn't the only one awake at this hour.

At the foot of her bed was the spare mattress, laying horizontal relative to her own bed's position, and laying flat on his back with one leg propped on top of the opposite knee was the familiar shape of Jim. Although it was dark, Loona could tell that he certainly wasn't asleep, a defeated-sounding huff emanated from him for a split second.

Loona looks up from her phone and towards Jim's general direction on the floor; "What are you doing up?"

"…Can't sleep," Jim mumbles, still gazing up towards the ceiling as he continues to lay flat on his back.

Loona exhales through her nose a little before asking a follow-up question; "Why's that?"

Jim grunts in an incredulous fashion before giving a straightforward answer; “Why do you think? You can see the position I’m in, for shit sake, and you’re in the mood to ask the most obvious questions? This is all horrendous, it really is.”

“Okay, okay! I get it, I understand. You don’t have to be a bitch towards me about it,” Loona retorts in a hushed tone of voice, really not appreciating being spoken to in this manner.

“Then think about what you ask me, yeah? I’m still trying to get used to this,” the young man advised coldly, groaning in momentary pain from the injuries inflicted to his abdomen. Although the bleeding had long since stopped, the wounds that were left behind pained him if he moved the wrong way.

Loona appeared baffled, if not somewhat personally insulted, at the demeanor this Australian displayed towards her. In an impromptu manner, the hellhound decides to voice her confusion, albeit with a suppressed tone of voice; “I’m sorry, this how you repay me after I come and save your ass from certain death; being callous and all that shit? Where’s the appreciation? In fact, you’re very fucking lucky that I’m even allowing you to sleep here in my room - I don’t even allow dad to come in here!”

“Who said I don’t appreciate what you’ve done for me,” Jim interrogates, trying to stiffly shift himself on the torn and beaten mattress which was his temporary bed; “Look… I apologize for going crook at you, Loona, I really am. It’s just… I’m dazed and petrified of what’s happened and… and where I am, as you can see.”

“It's fine. Like I said, I get it. It isn’t too difficult to imagine how you feel, being here. … But listen, as long as you’re here, I promise nothing is going to happen to you if I have anything to say about it,” Loona assures with certainty, reminiscing back to how she felt for that week she was rendered stranded, isolated on Jim’s part of the living world with nobody to turn to and nowhere to go.

“What about him out there, hey? Your old man’s obviously far from happy that I’m here, who knows what he’ll pull off on me,” Jim openly expresses his worries, finally managing to sit upright to find Loona in her own, obviously much more comfortable bed, her scarlet-red eyes lightly illuminated in the dark like a dimly lit beacon.

To Jim’s confusion, Loona snickered through her teeth as if finding humor in his concerns for his own safety; “Oh come on, seriously? Blitz? He’s just a pompous and argumentative moron, the last asshole around here you should fear is him! Believe me, if dad wanted you dead, he would’ve killed you already.”

The young man forces out a sarcastic laugh as he looks through the dark towards the bedroom door leading outside; “That’s oddly reassuring, I suppose.”

Loona nods along in agreement with this sentiment: “Hm. If you wanna put it that way, sure. How are the wounds going?”

“They still hurt like hell, but it’s bearable,” Jim admits, grunting a little in pain while trying to maintain his sitting position on the floor. It was pretty obvious to anyone who saw him that he was uncomfortable with how he was positioned.

Taking pity upon the human, Loona hesitates for a moment on an offer that had just emerged within her mind. She thinks on it, considering the discomfort Jim must be feeling, all hunched over in that humiliating, pitiful position on an old mattress on the floor. If anything, it reminded Loona of the literal rubbish she had to sleep on during her time in the orphanage, the thought of which pained her to even think about. At last, Loona sighs before finally letting it out; “You wanna sit up here?”

Jim turns his head towards the general direction of the hellhound sitting upright in her bed; “Where?”

“Where do you think? Up here,” Loona elaborates, turning around to sit on the side of the bed, creating a space where her tenant could sit.

The young man seemed hesitant: “I-I dunno, matey. I mean, that’s your bed, yanno? You wouldn’t want someone else sitting on it.”

“Uh, yeah,” Loona bluntly replies; “I know it’s my bed, and I am offering you to sit up on it for the time being. Besides, I know you want to, you look uncomfortable as fuck down there.”

Reservations about the offer persisted; “Are… Are you su-”

“Yes. I’m sure. That’s why I’m offering. Now get off your ass and come sit up here,” Loona orders, though she intended no maliciousness.

With a pained wince, Jim stumbles onto his feet, taking a moment to find his footing before moving over to the bed. So as to not exacerbate his injuries, the human carefully sits down on the bed to the left of Loona, the hellhound invested in whatever was going on within the device she held. Immediately Jim felt an improvement with how he felt, the sturdy yet comfortable softness of the mattress assisted in improving his posture, helping to relieve the short and sharp stinging pains still lightly emanating from his inflicted injuries.

After a moment of stiff, almost uncomfortable silence, the hellhound to Jim's right spoke; "Much better, huh?"

"Yeah, it's alright," Jim mumbles, looking away in discomfort.

"Oh come on, just 'alright'? It's gotta be miles better compared to that piece of shit on the floor," Loona comments, looking to her left with a smirk.

"I mean, if you put it that way," Jim concedes with a soft chuckle, in spite of the situation he found himself in.

"See? You know I'm right," the owner of the bed smirks, turning her attention back down towards her phone with a look of indifference in her eyes, the silence of the small hours of the morning once again taking hold within the room. To acknowledge his existence further, Loona darts her eyes back towards Jim, noticing that look of discomfort sitting on his face as he stared off at nothing in particular; "What's that look on your face for?"

"…I'm afraid," Jim solemnly admits.

"Of what?"

Loona's tenant shook his head in a somber way, turning his attention back on her; "…Me being down here… that isn't going to put a black mark against my name, will it?"

It took Loona a couple of seconds to process what Jim had asked, not necessarily understanding what he meant at first, though she did eventually begin to understand the question; "Are you

worried about ending up back down here, is that it?"

The sad, anxious look deep within the pitiful young man's eyes told her that she had assumed correctly. The utter hopelessness and doubt within his eyes made Loona's heart sink with pity for his predicament, on top of everything else that had happened: "O-oh, right.. To tell you the truth, Jim… I don't know. I'm sorry, I really don't know the answer."

It was at this exact moment did the hellhound finally appreciate how gargantuan of a problem it was for this mere human to reside down here. The sheer possibility that her decision to save him from his certain, lonely demise could end up being his downfall was perhaps the cruelest irony ever thought possible. If anything, Loona began to feel considerably guilty that she might have caused him this heavy anguish in the first place - it was the burden of responsibility that she would have to face on her own, a burden created from her own perhaps misjudged actions, no matter how well meaning they were.

"Hey. Hey, listen," Loona decides to add, managing to regain Jim's attention, his eyes metaphysically full of grave concern; "You're far from being a guy who deserves to be down here, I know that much. While I honestly don't know the answer to your question, I'll see what I can do to help you out, yeah? I'll find someone who would know. I'm not sure who that would be, but… but I'll find out who that 'someone' is, for you."

Jim doesn't say anything, continuing to hold his somber, worrisome stare directed at the hellhound next to him. This all still felt surreal to the simple human, stuck and injured in a place that he had no business being in, though at the same time seriously doubting if returning home would be any safer than staying here. It wasn't as if he had much of a choice either, the reality of which pained him terribly, arguably worse than the wounds he had sustained.

These doubts and anxieties were disrupted without warning when he felt Loona pat him firmly on the back, obviously in an effort to provide comfort, to reassure that everything would be alright in some form or another. The hellhound gave off a weak smile in a further attempt at reassurance, signaling non-verbally that he wouldn't be alone in this. If one thing was for certain within Loona's mind, it was that she was going to solve this entire situation once and for all, completely alone if absolutely necessary. She would have to confront this head-on anyhow, so there was no point delaying the inevitable; that would no doubt make things much worse than they already were. At the end of the day, for the first time perhaps ever, Loona was going to bear the burden of accepting responsibility.

Unfortunately, as of yet, she wasn't sure how.

Familiar Faces

The calm, trancing serenity of the gently flowing river accompanied Jim as he sat alone by the river bank, leaning himself up against the fragile, pale bark of the eucalyptus tree he nestled himself under, providing adequate shade against the beating midday sun. The local bird population stirred above him within the ancient tree's sturdy branches, serenely singing their gentle bush song while they shifted around within the leaves. The entire scene to which Jim was a part of seemed so tremendously familiar to him, the kind of familiarity that calls you home whenever you remembered blissful moments such as this. The more he thought about it, the more the young man began to realize that he was apparently waiting for something to happen, though at this point in time, he wasn't sure as to what that something was.

To his brief surprise, a turn of his head to his left revealed that he wasn't alone; sitting a few feet away from Jim was Loona, resting much in the same position as himself, her right arm propped up on her raised knee while she stared aimlessly into the surrounding wilderness. This confused the young man slightly as he began reacting to the resurgent pain within his abdomen, the wounds from his confrontation still present.

"Still hurts, huh," Loona asks while she continues to stare off into the distance, not once looking towards the human present with her.

"For sure," Jim casually replies, watching as the blood slowly stains onto his blue button-up shirt once more; "How long do you think this will last?"

Loona seemed to shrug at this question; "As long as you'd like. Can't worry about it too much, I guess."

Jim found himself rather confused, unsure of what the hellhound meant by the rather odd advice. Not wanting to worry about it too much, he shrugs before looking back out into the surrounding bushland, the calming, neutered serenity continuing around them in its enveloping ambience. For good measure, Jim happened to look back down towards his abdomen, discovering that the blood staining his shirt had completely vanished, and now resting within his lap was, strangely enough, a rusty lock box with a loose-hanging padlock. Without much warning or context, a wandering thought made itself known into his mind, practically begging for Jim to make its presence known to Loona.

Ultimately, he decided to entertain this thought, acknowledging its nagging presence by asking the accompanying hellhound a rather simple inquiry: "Hey, Loona? You reckon everything will be

okay?”

Upon hearing this question, Loona cautiously nodded, seemingly considering her answer to this simple, yet thought-provoking question. At last, she turns her head towards the human to her right with a serious expression on her face before finally providing her answer: “Our true enemy is yet to reveal himself.”

Jim’s attention is diverted away from Loona and back across the gently flowing river, the familiar noise of movement arising somewhere amidst the dense tree-line. He focuses his eyes to a squint in an attempt to find… something, though he wasn’t sure as to what he expected to find. Suddenly, his eyes focus on something standing motionlessly amidst the obscurity of a dense patch of wild foliage.

A tall, dark silhouette…

Jim abruptly awoke from his abnormal yet oddly calm fever dream, finding himself lying face-up towards the ceiling, laying horizontally on the rather comfortable mattress of Loona’s bed with his legs hanging lazily off the side. To his relief as he raised his head to check the gauze patches - contrary to his dream - Jim discovered that his wounds hadn’t begun profusely bleeding once more and were exactly as Loona had left them with her amateur yet efficient nursing technique. It didn’t take too long for him to realize where exactly he had unwillingly fallen asleep on, his eyes widening a little in fear that the hellhound wouldn’t much appreciate it.

Speaking of that certain usually surly and indifferent woman, she piped up to the right of him; “Was wondering when you’d finally wake up,” Loona reveals as she lay in the same adjacent position relative to the headboard on the opposite end of the sturdy mattress, her two pillows supporting her head while she stared up at the ceiling.

“Ah bugger.. I feel asleep, didn’t I,” Jim cautiously asks, obviously knowing the answer already; “Sorry, mate; guess I collapsed, hey?”

“Don’t worry about it, you’re fine,” Loona reassures with a chuckle through her bared teeth, revealed through a small parted grin; “I figured I might as well grant you some mercy and let you sleep on something less shit.”

“Taking pity, hey? On me? Now why would you go do that,” Jim asks sarcastically, heaving himself upright, noticing that he didn’t feel as much pain emanating from his acquired wounds whenever he moved himself.

“... I’m not even gonna answer that,” Loona bluntly replies, shaking her head at the rather self-depreciative question while lifting herself off her bed. Immediately after getting up, she begins to stretch, arching her stiff back and extending both her arms behind her head, allowing her joints to lightly crackle as a result; “Ngh! That’s better. Anyway, uh.. Help me out here, what am I gonna do with you?”

Jim seemed confused, if not visibly slightly perturbed, at the passing comment Loona had just made: “W-What do you mean?”

Loona snorts in a lightly teasing manner at her tenant’s sudden reservation, rolling her eyes at him; “Relax! It’s just a figure of speech. I mean, like.. you can’t stay here forever, you know?”

The young man scoffs at this remarkable observation, though at the same time baffled at the mere prospect that he may have to go outside, away from the limited sanctuary of the apartment: “If you’re seriously suggesting that I go out.. there, then no; I’m not moving from here.”

“Then what are we supposed to do; keep you here like a caged dog? Besides, dad is going to go insane if you stay here for one second longer,” Loona goes on to elaborate, attempting to weigh their options of where Jim could go besides this mangy old apartment. It seemed, however, that there was only one workable option she could go with; “I guess.. I guess I could always take you into work, seems to be the “safest” option that we got.”

The mere suggestion of this idea didn’t resonate well with the Australian in question; “Your work? As in, the place where criminally insane cunts come and order hits on other arseholes? That’s the safest option?!”

“I’m working with what I can! Go on then, wise guy; what’s your solution?” Loona remarks in return, folding her arms and raising her brow while not expecting anything exactly workable within their circumstances.

Jim ran his hand rigidly down his face, obviously exhausted from this ridiculousness already; “Oh for shit sake- Home, Loona! I want to go home!”

Loona exhales in an exhausted manner, tired of hearing how argumentative her tenant was being; “You know, I would love that as well in all honesty, Jim, but we need to figure out-”

“What? Figure out what? Who did this to me? They’ll keep tracking me down for sure if they don’t think I’m dead already! I might as well face them myself,” Jim argues without thinking on the consequences, his thought process obviously still in a dazed and confused mess, scarred by the gargantuan disaster that had unfolded within the past twenty-four hours.

Upon hearing Jim’s borderline insane idea, Loona’s scarlet eyes widened in utter disbelief; “What! Are you even listening to what you’re suggesting; you want to confront them? Okay, say hypothetically that you do face them, what happens when they do actually kill you?”

Jim shrugs with pessimistic indifference to the idea; “Ah well! If that’s what’s meant to happen, so be it!”

In spite of this uncharacteristic pessimism from the human, Loona persisted with her standpoint; “It won’t be “so be it” if you do end up coming back down here, now will it? What WILL put a black mark against your name is trying to kill them in revenge!”

“… Ah fuck, maybe you’re right,” the young man concedes, running his fingers back and forth across his scalp, further messing up his already unkempt hair; “But what if it’s self defence?”

“No! I’m sorry, but you’re not going to go back up there with them still at large! I won’t let you, so quit thinking about it,” the hellhound states very emphatically, obviously not budging from her position with no chance at any form of negotiation.

It appeared as if Jim was particularly insulted by Loona’s choice of words; “You won’t let me? Do I need to ask you for permission on what I want now, is that what you’re hinting at? Maybe that moron outside is right; I have become your damn “human pet”!”

Loona’s worrisome facial expression quickly turns into a frustrated sneer in reaction to the accusing observation her tenant had just made; “Okay! Now you’re starting to really get on my nerves!”

BANG! BANG! BANG!

Both parties within this argument are jolted out of their fiery exchange to the invasive sound of intense, heavy knocking on the bedroom door, followed by an all too familiar voice; “You better listen to me in there, you inbred hick! If you keep arguing with my Loonie-Tooney, I *will* follow up with the threat I made yesterday; This is your FINAL FUCKING WARNING!”

It was the mutual feeling within Loona’s bedroom between herself and the human that perhaps it was best to end this petty argument there and then, in fear of unleashing Blitz’s unhinged wrath if they persisted. Replicating Loona’s own actions a mere minute or so prior, Jim finally hauls himself off of the bed carefully, acting with intense caution not to exacerbate his wounds which were still on the mend; a part of him wondered for a moment if he would need stitches. His socks made contact with the blunt, cold ground while he gave his joints a stretch, still somewhat weak from the trauma which was inflicted upon him so suddenly; it was as if his body was still trying to comprehend what exactly had occurred, in an almost continuous state of shock.

In a drastic change in tone from mere seconds earlier, Loona decides to take charge of the emotion within the room with a swift change in topic; “How are you feeling anyway, with the wounds and stuff?”

“I reckon I’ll survive, don’t worry,” Jim informs while looking down at his blood-stained shirt, still unbuttoned from the day before and the spilt blood since dried out; “Bugger, I look bloody horrendous with this shirt though.”

“Mhm. Ditto,” Loona chuckles at the comment, yawning obnoxiously without being bothered in the slightest to cover her mouth, bearing her row of near razor-sharp teeth.

The maimed young man present with Loona within the room shudders; “Shit, that looks terrifying.”

The hellhound acted none the wiser to this spontaneous comment; “What does?”

“Fucken- those bloody teeth of yours! It’s enough to petrify a man,” Jim further elaborates, weakly grinning to accompany his banterful comment, finding room for his witty sense of dry humor in spite of his predicament.

Upon hearing this almost humorous comment, Loona let out a boastful wry smirk; “Yeah, I think I’m gonna take that as a compliment. I can do more to some little uppity, self-important shitstain than just petrify them, trust me.”

“I’ve seen you nearly tear apart those boars back home, mate, so I don’t doubt you one bit,” Jim cackles softly, glad that the earlier tension had practically dissipated, at least for this moment in time before continuing; “You know.. Now don’t take offense to this, but that reminds me of a story my mother once told me.”

“What? W-Why would I take offense to that,” Loona inquires with brief suspicion on the subject matter, not entirely sure of where exactly this conversation was going.

The young man shrugs weakly with his hands sitting casually in his trouser pockets; “Ah, well, I dunno. Just making sure that you don’t, I suppose.”

Loona raises her eyebrow in mild curiosity; “Go on then, what’s the story? Tell me about it, then I’ll decide if I take offense to it. I highly doubt I will, though.”

“Suppose I don’t have much of a choice, huh? Sure, I’ll tell ya, seeming that you’re that eager,” Jim finally capitulates, rubbing the back of his neck to soothe an acquired knot, causing it to suddenly release to his relief before at last retelling the story:

“Aight, so.. My family’s got a long historic connection to carpentry and hunting, hence why I’m a hunter and carpenter myself; I’m a continuation of that tradition. I got the hunter part of me from my mother’s side, they used to hunt game when they first came out to Australia in the late Victorian period; it was really their only proper source of income, yanno?

Anyway, there’s an uncle from my mother’s side, his name’s ‘Owen’; a grumpy old bastard who now lives in South Australia, but he’s alright. Mum told me a story about how he nearly, well.. how he nearly lost his, uh.. his “manhood” to a wolf while on a hunting trip over in Bavaria.”

A sudden, shrill, and all-too-familiar male voice echoed from behind Loona’s door from the living room; “Lost his dick to a dog? HA! Oh, fuck me, that’s hilarious!”

“Dammit, Blitz, don’t eavesdrop into my conversations!” Loona calls out rather abruptly, obviously not appreciating this unexpected invasion of her privacy. While shaking her head in disbelief, she gestures her hand towards Jim so he could continue; “Sorry about him. So, uh, you were saying?”

“Ah, well,” Jim stammers momentarily, somewhat taken aback by Loona’s fearsome aggression; “A-Anyhow, how it happened was that he was with some Austrian he became mates with over there, ‘Ernst’, who knew the area and some wild deer they could hunt. They were out about five miles deep in this forest near some town called “Muhldorf” or something like that, and they’d just finished setting up some bait at the base of some shallow stream they came across.

The way that Uncle Owen described it - at least from what I’ve heard - is that at some point they spotted this small pack of gray wolves off into the distance, and Ernst - probably foolishly - decided he wanted to try to get closer; take a photo of some of them because his daughter’s favorite animal were wolves or something like that.

Anyhow; they end up trying to approach them cautiously, and the story goes that the wolves noticed them somehow and began running after them at an alarming rate. One of them - this big alpha male-looking monster - comes charging at my Uncle, tackles him to the ground and ends up nearly ripping his balls and leg off!

That was until he managed to shoot it through the abdomen with his rifle, and-… you’re not bloody laughing at this, are ya?”

Lo and behold, leaning up against the wall, all the while trying to suppress her laughter with limited success was Loona; “Hah! What? Is it a crime to find something like that hilarious now?”

“It’s a man nearly losing his genitals, his prize bleeding jewels! Why would that be hilarious to you?”

With a brief snorting chuckle, Loona shrugs; “What did you expect? You know I’m an asshole in that way! You know how many times I’ve seen something like that happen to some asswipe and I end up cry-laughing over it?”

“Mm, I can only imagine,” Jim mumbles, rubbing the bridge of his nose with his fingers in an attempt to wake himself up further. A drastic shift in his demeanor signals to Loona that now was the time to speak on more pressing matters; “Anyhow, serious talk.. s-so what’s the plan, how are we gonna do this?”

In replication of this sudden change of tone, the hellhound, in obligation, returned to conspiring a plan; “We already know that dad’s not gonna help us, so, uh.. How about this; I know this is gonna sound degrading for you and whatever, but hear me out, alright?”

Jim began to feel a sense of nervous foreboding; “I already don’t like the sound of this, but go on.”

“… Look, I’ll tell you straightforward; I was thinking of wrapping you up in that bed sheet, then tying your hands and feet together while we haul you into work-”

“I’m not doing that,” Jim instantly protested, evidently against the idea.

“Oh, for- Can you quit arguing with me? It’s not like we have any other choice. If they see us coming in with some fucking idiot walking with us dressed in a white sheet, they’ll get suspicious,” Loona argues, perhaps making a good point; “Others know what our line of work is, so if you’re tied up, they’ll assume that it’s just a part of our work; you get it?”

Jim lets out a guttural sigh, dropping his head down towards the floor with his hands on his hips, giving the proposition serious thought; “… Alright, we’ll do it. You better not suffocate me, though.”

“As if I would. I’m not *that* much of an asshole, you know,” Loona shakes her head; “Anyway, can you give me my room back? I gotta get a change of clothes.”

Jim obliges with a nod before staggering his way back outside, closing the door behind him. And with that, Loona at last had her room to herself, giving her some private time to think; to once again take in the responsibility that she had bestowed upon herself. With a brief huff and a mumble of something under her breath, the hellhound proceeds to change out of her sleepwear and into her usual clothing kept neatly on the foot of her bed.

As Loona prepares herself for the day, a foreign feeling begins to emerge slightly within the room, one which causes her to begin feeling slightly unsettled. She freezes right before beginning to comb the knots out of her hair, trying to figure out what exactly was causing her to feel perturbed, narrowing her eyes into a confused squint. Loona listens into her surroundings, hyper-fixating on every minute detail of the room around her while being careful not to make any sudden movements. The sole occupant of the room noted that, strangely enough, a faint ringing sound

began to softly reverberate somewhere within her ear; an odd sense of unfamiliar, foreboding tinnitus.

Loona practically jumps out of her skin when she notices something within the corner of her eye, reflecting within a mirror leant up against her bedroom wall! Her eyes widened in utter disbelief when she realized who it was.

It was the familiar, unwelcoming, stocky silhouette of the older female hellhound from the adoption center, the only thing visible from her wretched, darkness-veiled silhouette being two white pinpoints where her eyes should be. Loona was completely speechless, petrified and paralyzed by the specter behind her, watching it helplessly approach from the reflection of the mirror before it stops right behind her; the white pinpoints seemingly fixated on Loona's horrified expression. The hellhound felt her eyes begin to strain, as it almost physically pained her to even bear to look at the all-too-familiar and foreboding specter behind her.

Suddenly, it spoke in an echoey, distorted voice:

"… Still a good-for-nothing leech … aren't you…?"

…

"… Hellhounds like you … Just another commodity to replace … a burden … a simple animal …"

…

"… Don't you dare call me that, you rotten, old BITCH!"

With intense and swift vigor, Loona furiously snaps out of her paralyzed state, immediately swinging around wildly with a ferocious left hook, ready for her fist to come into contact with the hellhound she was more-than-certain was behind her!

Yet, that impact never came…

Nobody.

Nobody in sight.

In an almost panicked state of mind, Loona scans her room intensely, brimming with overwhelming fury and determination to find that wretched, old hag of a hellhound from those terrible years ago. Her wide, scarlet-red eyes scanned one corner of the room to another, breathing heavily from the sudden adrenaline rush that hit her with near-unbearable strength. To Loona's greatest relief, it seemed that she was alone, with the specter nowhere to be seen. With an unsteady sigh of relief, she wipes the tears that had formed around the boundaries of her eyes, finally calming down; the accompanying monotone, foreboding tinnitus had also ceased completely.

The hellhound is startled once more by an urgent knock at the door, accompanied by a familiar masculine voice; "Loonie? Loonie! Pumpkin, what's wrong?! I-Is everything okay in there?"

"Y-yeah.. yeah, I'm okay Blitz. I'm fine," Loona assures, leaning up against the wall to catch her bated breath, wiping the nervous sweat from her brow and eyes and scanning the room once more out of an abundance of precaution.

"You sure, sweetie? D-Did something scare you?"

"Yeah.. Yeah, I'm sure," Loona immediately replies without a second's thought before whispering under her breath so that nobody else would hear her; "What the fuck was that? Think I'm finally going insane.."

Her adoptive father didn't seem entirely convinced; "You better not be telling me lies, sweetie! If something's the matter, you need to tell da-"

"Blitz! I said I'm fine! Now quit asking, okay?"

The imp seemed to oblige to his daughter's strict request, judging from the fact that not another word was spoken from outside except an utterance to himself which Loona couldn't decipher. She returns to leaning against the wall, at last fully composing herself in the aftermath of the fight-or-

flight situation that had nearly sent her to the brink of insanity. Unfortunately, Loona couldn't explain what she had seen, nor did she have a clue of what could have caused it, though one thing was definitely for certain within her mind:

It didn't bode well for what could come soon enough…

Time had passed since the plan to escort the human out of the apartment had been "agreed" upon, with the human in question at last veiled within the makeshift "body bag" and bound together loosely with some rope. A thin slit around the space of his mouth allowed for the bushman to breathe easily, though the scent of his dried blood on the ripped bedsheet did cause him to become nauseated. Throughout the process of him being wrapped up and roped like some prized animal, he protested, asking for a better way, only for Loona and Blitz to convince him, at long last, that this was the only feasible option.

Now came what was arguably the hardest part; executing the plan with accuracy and without fault which, considering Blitz's inability at the best of times to be discreet, was easier said than done.

Both father and daughter, along with their veiled "captive" resting over the hellhound's shoulder, carefully made their way outside of the apartment building and towards the parked company van, practically awaiting their arrival. To Blitz, this felt almost like a chore rather than a measure of goodwill, still finding it difficult to understand why exactly his daughter had decided to effectively nurse this "dumb hick" in the first place. Nonetheless, whether he liked it or not, it appeared that she had decided it was "bring the burden to work day", and it seemed that nothing he could say would change the stubborn hellhound's mind. Blitz manages to unlock the company van with ease, being intensely aware of his surroundings while multitasking in assisting Loona with loading Jim into the backseat, being careful not to make any wrong moves; this was, once again, easier said than done with the human groaning and shifting in discomfort.

"Fucken, is this really bloody necessary," Jim complains, his voice muffled from behind the bedsheet he was wrapped in; "It's hard to breathe in this basta- Ow, fuck! That was my wound, you idiot!"

"Oh suck it the fuck up, pindick! You're lucky to even be in my van," Blitz coldly replies out of frustration, dusting his hands off as if Jim carried a disease before looping around to the driver's seat.

Loona, in comparison to the imp, was drastically more aware of the young man's physical well-being, taking the time to inspect his sitting position and asking him questions, such as; "Are you alright back there", and; "They haven't started bleeding again, have they," in reference to Blitz's rough handling of the "casualty's" physical state. This display of extraordinary courtesy from Loona only served to frustrate Blitz as an unintentional yet inevitable side effect.

As soon as Blitz slammed the car door shut from inside, he protested to his daughter vigorously with utter confusion; "Why are you continuing to be his nurse?! I-I really don't get you, sweetie; are you even in your right mind at the moment?"

Loona groans, knowing the lecture she was about to receive; "Ohhh, okay, here we go again! What's your problem with what I'm doing?"

"I think you already know what my problem is," Blitz refutes; "My position hasn't changed from yesterday, you know? That THING at the back is staining my van seats with his putrid odor!"

"Oh, fuck right off, you petulant shortarse," Jim sneeringly mumbles from the backseat, obviously not taking the comment too well.

"Duh! I can tell you haven't changed your damn mind," Loona acknowledges, folding her arms together while they shifted through the traffic towards work; "Hold the phone; why are you getting involved in my business anyway! Didn't you say yesterday that this was entirely my job and you wouldn't get involved?"

Blitz stammers a little, trying to refute this decent point, knowing that he had just been put on the spot. Loona smirks through her surly glare towards her father, knowing that she had gained the upper hand. Her smirk grows wider when her father ultimately decides to say nothing in response, causing her to feel proud of her little moment of victory in the repetitive argument. There was a long, rather tense silence within the van as they drove towards the final stretch with the office building finally in sight, a mixture of emotions brewed intensely within the interior while Blitz at last parked the company van. One thing was for certain; this was going to be an interesting day, that was to say the least.

"Alright, we're here," Blitz announces without a hint of enthusiasm; "You're carrying his ass upstairs, Loonie; I'll bring everything else."

“Already on it,” Loona obliges, hopping out the car before opening the side door. She is then careful to stow the human over her shoulder, making sure that she didn’t apply too much pressure on the day-old wounds.

“Try to stay quiet now, we don’t want somebody else letting on who you are if anyone sees us,” Loona whispers cautiously to Jim, to which the human gladly obliges; “The cover story is that you’re a body; you’re just plain old business work for the moment.”

“Yeah nah, that isn’t degrading at all,” Jim whispers in return, only for him to be shushed swiftly by the hellhound handling him.

In an almost coincidental turn of events, as the pair of IMP Employees - plus baggage - approached the entrance to the building, a few passers-by glared almost suspiciously at the person-shaped white sheet resting awkwardly on Loona’s shoulder. It was only when the hellhound spun around and growled menacingly at them did they decide that it was probably best to mind their own business. To both Loona and Blitz, it felt exactly as if they both held the position of keeping the world’s - or in this case, hell’s - best kept secret as quiet and under wraps as possible, like a pair of bodyguards; the only stark difference between them was how enthusiastic and determined they were to enact upon the task.

Blitz jabs the elevator button hard, the familiar monotone chime sounded-off as the doors opened, allowing for them to enter the elevator itself as they had done countless times before. Just before Loona finally enters the elevator with human in hand, she darts her cautious and alert gaze back towards the entrance, waiting for a couple of seconds to check if they had been followed as extra precaution. After being convinced that they hadn’t, she dips back into the elevator, allowing for the doors to finally close.

It took them only a few minutes but at last the elevator doors slid open to the floor which hosted “IMP Headquarters”. Blitz let out a dramatic huff and exited the elevator, followed by Loona who followed closely behind, her left shoulder beginning to strain under the endured weight put upon it, though this pressure wouldn’t last much longer with the entrance to the office now in sight, a mere few meters away. To Blitz and Loona’s collective confusion, however, there were two familiar faces missing where they usually would wait until their boss arrived; It appeared that Millie and Moxxie were late. This factor prompted Blitz to run his hand down his face in frustration at this inconvenience, grabbing his keys afterwards and proceeding to unlock the door allowing for it to lazily swing open with ease.

Loona stumbles a few feet inside, wincing in discomfort at the constant pressure on her shoulder before finally setting Jim down firmly on his feet, immediately stripping the rope and blanket away to reveal the human encased within. The human in question winces, his eyes straining from the

sudden burst of the fluorescent lights illuminating the office. He blinks a couple of times, allowing for his eyes to adjust to the sudden change in lighting, at last able to make out the space around him.

It was soon clear to him that he was standing in the middle of an office; to his right was what was evident to be the front desk, a computer and a landline phone set upon its surface. To the left of the desk was another door leading to an office, given the rather literal name of "Blitzo Office", a lack of punctuation obviously displayed. Off into the far corner of the office was another door leading to what was labeled as a "meeting room" in the same crude writing. To his far left was a window to the outside with the blinds drawn, perhaps for his own sanity's sake.

"Here it is, dear old Jim-boy," Blitz announces begrudgingly, forcing a sarcastic smile; "The "safest" place imaginable! Our regular visitors are very approachable, trust me."

"Quit being a dick, Blitz," Loona scowls, setting herself down at her accustomed front desk.

"What? I'm only giving your little pet here a rundown on how things go down," Blitz wryly smirks, his gaze fixated firmly on Jim who was still somewhat unsettled by the whole thing; "So, yeah, a gentle reminder Jim-boy; I run things here, got it? Whatever I say, goes, and if you challenge me, I'll make sure to…"

Blitz is stopped mid sentence when he notices Loona piercing him with the most furious stare imaginable, her irises small; she was evidently fed up with his constant childlike bullying.

Quite swiftly, the "ringleader" of the IMP team changes the subject; "Ah, what the hell… Dammit, where's M&M?! They should've been here by now!"

"As if I would know," Loona shrugs, not necessarily caring; "Knowing them, Moxxie probably stayed up all night playing a game of "rearranging Millie's guts" until the crack of dawn."

Blitz lets out an obnoxious groan at the inconvenience before making a beeline straight into his office; "Give me a minute," the imp orders in an annoyed gruff tone of voice, abruptly slamming the door behind him to try and locate his two missing employees. The deafening "BANG!" of the door slamming practically suffocated any further noise for the next minute, leaving the remaining two parties present within the main lobby of the office standing around awkwardly.

For the first time since he arrived, Jim was the one to work up the courage and take charge in breaking the silence; “The fuck’s his problem?”

Loona throws her hands up in defeat, shaking her head; “Beats me. He’s difficult to figure out, as you can see.”

“Right… so he gladly squats in my joint for two days on my couch, but can’t stand to return the ruddy favor, huh?”

“Seems that way; But hey, don’t take it up with me. I don’t know what goes on up in that fucked-up head of his,” Loona concedes with indifference, propping her feet back up on the desk, proceeding to scroll through her phone aimlessly.

Jim staggers over to the couch, crashing himself down upon it; “Righto… you know, this is quite the intriguing “butcher” you help out at,” he jokes with a weak snicker.

The receptionist couldn’t help but exhale through her nose in suppressed laughter, accompanied with a smirk; “Heh. Still remember that lame cover story, do ya? I mean, calling this place a “butcher” isn’t too far from the truth, I suppose.”

In all of his consideration, Jim seemed to agree with this sentiment, hunching over while his leg bounced with a nervous twitch.

Behind the door of Blitz’s office was a scene of frustration in reaction to one inconvenience after the other. It seemed that everything had been going wrong; the coffee machine refused to work, his office chair was giving way with the hydraulics acting up, and to top it all off, his phone was refusing to turn on. The increasingly frustrated imp scowls to himself while battling to turn on his phone, figuring that he needed a replacement once he found the time and money.

“Oh for the love of- STAY ON, you piece of shit!” Blitz bellows loudly, his face near red-hot with anger.

Before tempers could boil over completely, a sudden - perhaps stupid - idea found its way into Blitz's thought process, a solution that he had found from some old mafia television series that originated from the living world - he had spent all night once binge-watching three-quarters of it. The premise of this solution was simple - take the bottom of a shoe and whack the son-of-a-bitch until it decided to work. It had a simple name, too, easy to remember; "The Brogan Adjustment."

"This better work, you funny old Italian Bastard," Blitz mumbles under his breath, digging around within his desk's drawer to find, perhaps very conveniently, a singular worn-out laced-up dress shoe. Where had he acquired it? Blitz couldn't quite remember; probably from their stint at Crim's mansion, but who knows.

With the fiercest swing, Blitz smacks the worn sole of the shoe down hard on the phone, making the device lightly bounce on top of the desk! For good measure, he whacks it harder for a second attempt before grabbing the phone to check if his "efforts" had paid off. To Blitz's own surprise, the phone at last turns on with the press of the power button, the glow of the screen shining in his face within the dimly lit office.

Blitz's yellow eyes lit up in triumph; "Aha! Thank you Paulie Walnuts, you mad fucking genius!"

Wasting no time at all, he immediately speed-dials Moxxie's phone number before holding up the device to his ear, impatiently waiting for his employee to answer his call. It took a couple of seconds - perhaps a few seconds too long - before a familiar voice appeared from the other end of the line; "H-Hello?"

"Moxxie! Where the fuck are you two? You were supposed to be here five minutes ago, what's the hold up," Blitz immediately interrogates, impatiently tapping his free hand against the surface of his desk.

The shorter male imp on the other end of the line stammers a little, trying to find his words; "I-I apologize, sir; we didn't get that much sleep last night, been trying to wake up f.. f-for the past two hours," Moxxie explains drowsily, a loud yawn shortly after finishing his sentence.

Blitz groans at this explanation; "I barely get sleep either, but you don't hear me bitching about it, do ya? I work my ass off to keep us all afloat and you're out here moaning about not getting your precious beauty sleep?"

“Again, Millie and I are very sorry about this! W-We’re nearly there, okay? We’re coming up the sidewalk now,” Moxxie explains, trying to ease his boss’ fiery temper before it had the opportunity to become any hotter.

“Right,” Blitz acknowledges, shifting his eyes back towards the door leading outside to the main reception room, overhearing Loona explaining to the visiting human about what the protocol would be if a client ever came in; “... Look, Mox; don’t freak out when you come in, ‘kay? That damn human is here.”

“He is?”

“Yup,” Blitz lets out a defeated and aggravated sigh, Jim’s mere presence within his business headquarters seemingly inconveniencing him; “Loonie-Tooney decided it was “Bring-The-Burden-To-Work Day”, and she wasn’t going to hear any ‘ifs’ or ‘buts’ about it.”

Moxxie lets out a sigh; “She’s always one to argue, isn’t she?”

“... I’ll pretend to disagree with you, Mox; though to be clear, just this once. Sorry for getting bitchy at ya, by the way; just a little tense with - you know - this human. Gotta say, this isn’t like you to be this late. What’s going on,” Blitz asks in a rare gesture of common courtesy.

There is a momentary pause in Moxxie’s willingness to speak, perhaps hesitant on admitting whatever was the matter; “… It’s nothing, sir; i-it was just one of those nights where you can’t sleep.”

Blitz wasn’t convinced, though decided against pressing Moxxie on the matter, at least for the moment; “Sure. Just focus on getting here and be quick about it,” he orders before hanging up the phone abruptly, closing his eyes while he stood there for a moment, trying to compose himself. It takes him a couple of seconds, but soon enough Blitz finds the courage to leave the confines of his office, heading back out into the reception room while fixing up his coat.

Just as soon as he emerges from his office, Blitz begins to dictate what the ‘terms and conditions’ were with regards to his visitation; “Alright! You listen to me good, Jim-Boy, ‘cause I’ll only tell you once; there’s some ground rules I need to make known to ya which you need to follow to a minute-fucking tee, capiche?”

“Right..,” Jim begrudgingly accepts, turning his gaze up towards Blitz. Loona, meanwhile, looked on from Blitz’s left with an analytical expression, making sure her father wasn’t about to say anything too stupid.

The IMP CEO fixes up his red-skull brooch as a sign of authority as he clears his throat in a dramatic way; “You listening? Okay; so, first off! You do not, and I repeat, DO. NOT. … Enter into my office at any time UNLESS I instruct you otherwise! In fact, you do not do anything without my or Loonie’s express permission; A gentle reminder that while you’re here, you have NO free will!”

“As if that wasn’t evident enough,” Jim nods along.

Blitz continues his little yet comprehensive diktat; “Alright, Second point of order! If I, myself; Blitz - the O is silent by the way - or Loonie over here to my left gives you an order, you follow it WITHOUT argument, and I know by now how much you love being argumentative as of recently!”

Jim’s focus was turned elsewhere as he looked around the room, though he nodded along using the little attention that he did have. To his right was a large window which gained viewing access to the hallway outside. Across the hallway in question was what appeared to be fluorescent-pink lighting lining the doorway and bottom-frames of an adjacent business, the letters “V” and “M” crudely spray-painted on the double-doors which was the entrance.

The young man’s curiosity piqued, urging him to ask a question; “What’s that over there; "V.M." ?"

The mere mention of the adjacent “competitors” caused Blitz to groan heavily, somewhat wishing that they weren’t bought up at all.

To break the stagnation, it was Loona who satisfied Jim’s sudden curious inquiry; “Verosika Mayday. She’s some kind of self-important pop-star that specializes in “fulfilling desires”, if you know what I mean.”

“I see,” Jim acknowledges, squinting at the distracting bright pink illumination, able to see the corner of what appeared to be a heart above the entrance doors; “Heh, I suppose she isn’t much different to the ones I’ve heard of back home.”

“Oh you wouldn’t know the half of it,” Blitz blurts out, scowling in the general direction of the adjacent business across the hallway, pressing his face against the glass with a look of contempt in his eyes; “She’s an insufferable woman, and she’d guarantee make mince meat out of your feelings in more ways than one!”

Jim slowly nods, getting uneasy at this assumed new threat; “Yeah nah, I’d believe that…”

Blitz scoffs before walking back towards the front desk, side-eyeing Verosika’s business set-up; “You better, for your own good. In fact, no, Point of Order Number Three; NEVER head over to that literal garbage dump over there for ANY reason! They will manipulate you, and that’s guaranteed!”

“Moxxie found that out the hard way, unfortunately,” Loona mumbles from under her breath, perhaps genuinely feeling sorry for the imp in question.

Once again wasting no time at all, the overzealous imp before Jim dictated the fourth point of order; “Okay, Rule Number Four! You heard me correctly, dickweed; Four! This one is probably for your own safety, by the way - Don’t ever fuck with M&M, unless you have a death wish! This rule is only voluntary though; If you wanna risk your own life like that, then fine by me in all honesty! Just don’t bleed all over the couch.”

Jim seemed somewhat confused; “Wh... Who the hell’s M&M?”

This question was perfectly timed in an almost comedic way as the entrance door swung wide open, a small imp dressed in a rather smart suit and red bowtie stumbling right in, panting heavily as if he had been running.

“S-Sorry we’re late, sir! W-We got held up downstairs with…” Moxxie’s eyes widened when he noticed the human sitting hunched over upon the torn couch, the human-in-question eyes fixated upon him in morbid curiosity. The awkward silence was almost deafening until Moxxie finally decided to break it; “... And I assume this is your ‘pet’, Loona?”

Loona was just about to answer the question until Blitz rudely chimed in to the receptionist’s annoyance; “Correctomundo! This is the bottom “M”, Jim-boy! You are to address him as “Moxxie”; professional marksman and bottom.”

Jim's eyes shift analytically at Moxxie, the shorter male imp standing awkwardly by the door as another imp almost equal in height caught up from closely behind; "Right… and who's the other shortarse behind him?"

Moxxie scowled at the name that had just been assigned to his wife, though Millie seemingly ignored it as she analyzed the human in fascination, trying to make heads-or-tails of him.

"That there is what we call a Millie; Professional Axe-Wielder and Top! You'd be surprised with who wears the trousers in their marriage," Blitz gladly explains, seemingly being consumed by the irresistible urge to use sexual innuendos.

Moxxie rolls his eyes; "That's just excellent, sir; do continue insulting me in front of this braindead human here!"

"Oh, do grow a pair, Mox," Blitz scoffs, perhaps finding the torment slightly amusing; "He's probably got more than you by a long shot!"

It was Jim's turn to express his dismay at the ongoing topic of manhood; "Is this what you do all day, Blitz; commenting on people's cocks? How old are you again?"

Blitz clicks his fingers and jabs his finger furiously in Jim's general direction; "HEY! What did I say about talking back literally less than a minute ago?"

"You didn't mention anything about talking back," Loona interjects from the front desk, having since stood up and was now leaning up against the front of the counter.

The IMP CEO seemingly chose to ignore Loona's correction, clapping his hands together in a charismatic fashion; "Anyway! I hope you all get acquainted with one another~! Shake hands, repeat your names, talk about politics and today's economy; whatever you humans do! Just follow the orders I've given you and you should be fine, got it?"

"Not as if I have much choice," Jim mumbles in compliance, looking up towards the ceiling with his hands on the side of his head, still trying to get used to this new - hopefully temporary - living situation.

While Moxxie was mildly apprehensive towards humans, considering his past experiences with them, Millie was more extroverted towards Jim, though still cautious of his towering presence over her. With analyzing eyes, she looks over the human up and down, the large dark-red patch of dried blood still staining his button-up blue shirt.

“What did all that to ya, mister,” Millie inquired towards the human, gesturing towards his abdomen.

“… Gunshots,” Jim bluntly replies, glaring back towards Millie’s direction with his own feeling of hesitancy; “… I recognise the both of you, yanno? Loona showed me what you’se look like when she ended up stuck with me.”

“Huh. Is that right?” Millie nods along, turning towards the hellhound behind her; “You know, mister; usually how it goes is that someone else is trapped with her, and that usually doesn’t end well, either. Kudos for surviving, in all honesty!”

Jim raises his eyebrow in mild interest; “Ah yeah?”

Millie nods with a smirk; “For sure! So tell me, you big mountain-man-looking thing; How’d ya tame that wild beast behind me?”

Loona growls angrily at this clearly provocative remark from the front desk, still leaning up against it.

“Well I certainly didn’t call her derogatory names like that, for one,” Jim explains, indirectly shunning the remark the female imp had just made. He momentarily clears his throat before continuing, feeling himself getting justifiably nervous; “… L-Look, I’m still trying to.. trying to get used to all this. I’ll be honest with you; you’re bloody unsettling to look at.”

Quite unexpectedly - at least from Jim’s perspective - Millie didn’t react too callously towards this sentiment, perhaps somewhat understanding where the human was coming from. Instead, she gave off a kind and reassuring look before speaking; “I understand, mister. It ain’t like this happens everyday! But hey, at least trust me when I say that I don’t wanna harm you, nor does anyone else here; unless you attack us first, of course. We aren’t that hot-headed… I mean, at least most of us.”

Loona abruptly huffs in defeat in the background, knowing full well that Millie was referring to her; “Oh, why me?!”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about! You’re proving my point right now,” Millie jabs right back in return, the mood in the room getting increasingly tense!

“From what I can see, you two don’t get on very well,” Jim comments, trying to subvert the drama unfolding.

“Huh! You wouldn’t know half of it. As you can see, I am very well-loved around here,” Loona decides to answer, directing an angry side-eye towards the female imp.

This time, Moxxie decides it was his turn to “poke the bear” - or in this case, the hellhound; “Isn’t tolerating you enough?”

“Oh for- See what I mean?!”

“Ohhh-Kay! That’s enough of the forsaken meet-and-greet,” Blitz suddenly interrupts the spat with every intention to prevent it from continuing; “We can all argue about petty bullshit all we want once we’ve figured out what we’re doing today!”

And with that announcement, the “brains” of the IMP operation trots his way over to the meeting room, calling for everyone to gather round and enter - except, obviously, for Jim who watched on as the trio of imps make their way over to finally get the day started. Loona slogs a little bit behind, her eyes fixated on Jim to check if he was still in a stable condition, observing his right leg continuing to bounce with a nervous twitch.

Ultimately, the hellhound decided to stop for a moment and ask; “How are you feeling about all this?”

“Terrible, but I’ll manage,” Jim concedes, looking up towards Loona, perhaps the only resident of this “pit” that he could trust.

“Sweetie, come join us! He’ll be fine - it’s not as if he’s going to melt!” Blitz rudely calls out, interrupting both the human and hellhound’s collective train of thought.

“Fine, I’m coming!” Loona obliges begrudgingly, heading over to the meeting room, but not before reassuring Jim with a swift, firm pat on his shoulder and a quick word of comfort; “Just chill out here as much as you can, alright? If anyone comes to the door, let us know. We won’t be too long.”

Jim nods slightly, looking up towards Loona with a mildly concerned expression; “No worries.”

And with that, Loona immediately joined the rest of the IMP team, closing the door behind her and hanging up the makeshift sign lovingly crafted by her father which read in crude writing; “Meeting In Progress”.

At least for the moment, Jim was alone within the reception room, sitting upon the worn and tired couch and using his right arm and fist to prop up his chin. Alone within his thoughts, Jim began to reminisce of home, perhaps much like the dream he had just before he woke up to the reality of this most bizarre nightmare. The muffled commotion inside the meeting room emanated from his left, perhaps the only somewhat comforting sound he had heard so far; to be in the company of individuals who at least hadn’t tried to kill him yet.

If only there was true certainty as to how he would fair.

The portal closes behind the three IMP assassins while Loona shuts the Grimoire firmly, nestling it under her arms and returning back to the main reception room where Jim awaited, the bushman now lying down on the couch to assist the healing process of his wounds. The hellhound receptionist sat herself back down at the front desk, pulling out a magazine from one of the drawers underneath and beginning to read the contents. Loona began to feel herself get lost within her thoughts, as she usually tended to do, with thoughts about other topics that meant more to her rather than being a lame receptionist. The words of the magazine seemed to pop out at her while she read them, preparing herself subconsciously to disassociate with her surroundings… that was until a word hit her with such force that it jolted her out of her daydreaming.

That word was “responsibility”.

Immediately after this word appeared within Loona's thoughts, she darts her eyes up from the confines of the magazine to find Jim staring blankly up at the ceiling on the couch, his hands clasped together upon his chest as he let out a brief deep guttural exhale.

In an almost subconscious move, Loona found herself blurting out a hastily thought-out statement to disrupt the awkward silence that was quickly setting in; "So, uh… yeah, we got the place to ourselves now. Finally, some peace and quiet."

"Mhm..," Jim merely vocalizes, still staring up at the ceiling.

Loona's eyes shift around the room, trying to bring up some form of conversation that would eradicate the awful silence. This task was thankfully taken off her hands by the human across the room who turned his gaze towards her general direction; "… Is this what you do all day, hey? Just… sit around and read magazines?"

"On most days, yeah," Loona confirms while resting her chin on her balled-up fist; "It's far from exciting, but hey; it is what it is."

"True," the human agrees with the sentiment, deciding to sit up within the couch to properly face the receptionist at her post; "… Just a moment; is there a marble statue of your dad's bust in that meeting room, or was I seeing things earlier?"

Loona couldn't help but chuckle at this correct observation; "There is, believe it or not! Don't worry, you're not going insane just yet. Dad commissioned some poor, shit-outta-luck sculptor a while ago to create his likeness just so he could show it off at the entrance. There was an incident where some angry client tried to smash it because we refused to give him his money back, which is what finally convinced dad's dumb ass to move it somewhere safer."

"Is that right?"

"Yup! I've always thought it looks ugly-as-fuck and would be better off turned into dust, but dad doesn't have the heart to get rid of it; his ego can only take so much," Loona smirks to herself, finding her own disparaging remark somewhat amusing.

Jim let out a suppressed, wheezing snicker through his teeth; “He sure does have one, doesn’t he? That, and a dirty mind.”

Loona vocalizes a monotone hum in response to this observation, looking back down towards her magazine which was lying flat open on the desk. Her free hand fidgeted on the surface of the desk, her fingers repeatedly tapping against it in a clear sign of boredom with her eyes examining the contents of the pages. Just outside of her peripheral vision, Loona notices the human slowly getting up from the couch with an audible heave, using the armrest as a crutch to assist in lifting himself up.

Her curiosity grows as she notices Jim beginning to head towards the window viewing out into the hallway, obviously wanting to look at something.

The receptionist decides to inquire into his intentions; “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Nowhere, I’m just getting up; tired of sitting down, it’s not good for me,” Jim explains himself.

“Right,” Loona acknowledges this explanation, watching his every move carefully; “You’re not looking towards Verosika’s, are you?”

“Just a glance,” the curious human confirms as he looks out, the bright pink lighting lining the walls almost straining his eyes; “… Doesn’t seem to be anyone there, hey?”

“They’re not there all the time. She's a celebrity, so that means she has a lot of celebrity bullshit to do; like traveling, tours, photoshoots, and… other stuff, I guess,” Loona goes on to explain, completely indifferent towards the topic; unlike her father.

Jim seemed mildly surprised; “You got that shit down here?”

Loona seemed confused; “Got what?”

“Like celebrities and other assorted dickheads,” Jim is quick to elaborate his question with morbid curiosity.

“I guess you can call them that,” Loona smirks, thinking to herself that the “assorted dickheads” remark was a rather fitting description for them.

Jim raises his brow in curiosity, nodding his head to the information before pacing around the office, holding his hands together behind his back as he waltzes around aimlessly. He appeared to walk around in slight discomfort, breathing shallowly at times and trying to swallow his saliva; “Bugger, I’m thirsty…”

“There’s a water cooler to my left if you need some,” Loona informs, gesturing her arm towards the company’s designated water cooler which was half-full.

The cooler displayed before him certainly was tempting, though despite his thirst he refrained from pursuing it; “I don’t know if I should…”

“Why? It’s water, it shouldn’t harm you,” Loona explains, trying to convince him to replenish himself for his own good.

“Y-Yeah, I know it is, but… it’s “hell-water”, yanno what I mean..?”

“What are you afraid of? Like, if you drink it, it might damn you or something along those lines,” the hellhound asks in an attempt to understand Jim’s concerns.

After a moment of hesitation, Jim decides to answer with a nervous shrug, confirming Loona’s assumption to be true; “Do you think it would?”

The hellhound let out a brief sigh and proceeded to grab her phone which was laying next to her, seeming to shuffle through the device before holding it up to her ear, waiting for whoever she was calling to answer.

The accompanying human appeared somewhat perplexed; “What are you-”

Before Jim could finish his sentence, Loona put her hand up in a sign for him to be quiet for a moment. An extra few seconds go by in silence until Loona's ears suddenly perk up, signaling that someone had answered.

"Hey Blitz, you there? … Bad time, huh? … Ah okay, so you sent Moxxie. Is he getting his ass kicked again? … No reason, only asking. Hey, listen, I won't waste your time; Can you get something for me while you're up there? … Just a few bottles of water if that's not so hard … Uhh, no, it's not for me, it's for-… yyyyeah, it's for him."

Loona furrows her brow in frustration in a sign to Jim that Blitz was rather unwilling to cooperate; if anything, this was to be expected. Her eyes locked on to Jim for a moment as she shook her head slowly in defeat, telling the human everything he needed to know about the imp's willingness to perform this errand. Loona rubs the bridge in between her eyes before beginning to speak once more:

"Can you not make this harder than it already is, please?! … It isn't that hard, all he needs is a few damn bottles of water! … Oh for fuck sake's- Look! If you can't do it for him, can you at least do it for me? P-Please? … I've already explained why I'm doing this, I'm not repeating myself. … Thank you! So, how long will you- huh? … Fine. What did you want me to ask him?"

Loona squints her eyes in confusion at the question she had to relay; "… Uh.. Weird thing to ask, but okay," she concedes before lowering the phone from her ear and turning to look at Jim; "Dad wants you to know if you're a furry."

Jim was equally as perplexed by the question; "What?"

"Beats me," Loona shrugs; "Probably best that you answer the question, I don't think he'll ever relent until you respond."

The bushman hesitates for a moment in time, seeming to think of an answer. After a few seconds of stagnation, he provides his definitive answer, "… W-What the fuck's a furry?"

The hellhound couldn't help but smirk at Jim's naivety before raising the phone back up to her ear; "Hey, you there? Yeah, it's safe to say that he isn't. … Alright, so in the next hour? … Okay, call me when you're done."

Just as Loona hangs up the call and sets her phone down back onto the desk, the human begins to speak up, albeit quietly; "… Apologies for making you do that."

Despite the human's outward display of regret over his request, his de-facto "caregiver" was quick to dismiss it; "Making me do what? Help you out? I did that on my own will."

Jim appeared to be taken aback by this admission; "You did, hey?"

"Nooo I didn't - You held a knife up to my throat and threatened me until I caved in to your demands!" Loona replies with overwhelming sarcasm, rolling her eyes at Jim's claims before giving off a reassuring smirk; "C'mon man, you should know me by now. If I didn't wanna do that for you, I wouldn't have done it in the first place; I can be a really stubborn bitch when I don't feel like doing something."

"I don't doubt that," Jim replies quietly, a small and appreciative smile appearing on his face. He breaks eye-contact to look down towards his dried and bloodied shirt, the bullet holes within the fabric clearly visible. He furrows his brow as he begins to ask a question; "You reckon I need to change the dressing, see how the wounds are going?"

"Best to be safe than sorry, I guess," Loona agrees with the suggestion; "There should be a fresh medical kit in the bathroom over there, I don't think it's been used yet."

"Got it."

Without much further delay, the human makes his way over to the bathroom door before pulling the handle and swinging it wide open. He was met with a simple, miniscule room which contained a toilet directly in front of him and a sink complete with a mirror to his right. A small cabinet lay directly below the sink with one of the doors slightly ajar, allowing for Jim to notice that a box-shaped object was contained within, practically taking up the entire space.

This discovery prompts him to swing the cabinet doors open and immediately retrieve the now apparent medical kit, holding it firmly within his grasp as he makes his way back outside, making a beeline straight to the couch. With a gentle wince, Jim sits down within the piece of furniture and partially unbuttons his shirt which revealed the gauze patches that Loona had applied for him the day prior. At first glance, it was probably beneficial that the human did tend to his bandages as the previous bleeding had caused them to weaken, the fabric beginning to tear in places and dried

blood still stuck to his skin, streaking across his abdomen in a grotesque, morbid pattern of dark-red blotches.

Without much delay, Jim proceeded to open the medical kit, revealing a limited selection of medicines, gauze patches, and other assorted *"do-it-yourself"* first-aid items. He examines everything contained inside the box before turning his attention back towards the old gauze patches, a hesitant hand hovering over the first one, preparing himself for the resurgent pain which would come soon enough.

It seemed, however, that Jim had stagnated longer than he expected as Loona's voice interrupted him from the background; "You've been staring at those bandages for ten seconds. You gonna pull them off or what?"

Jim lifts his head back up towards Loona who was still lazing by her post; "Pardon?"

Loona couldn't help but scoff; "Stop acting dumb, you heard me. Now come on, get to it! They're not gonna replace themselves."

The human obliges by the order given to him; "Right, uh… oh shit, uhh… fucken 'ell, where to start..?"

"Please don't tell me you don't know how to dress your own wounds. I mean, come on! I'm starting to wonder how you've even managed to live on your own up 'till this point," Loona comments in an almost disparaging way, a wry smirk beginning to appear on her muzzle - this was her usually callous way of trying to make light of a horrible situation.

Despite her comment, Jim doesn't respond in any way, continuing to stagnate from finally getting to work as his hands tremble uneasily. It soon became obvious to Loona that he was still in no position to treat himself; it seemed too cruel. If anything, watching the pitiful display before her made her feel terrible about the disparaging, snarky comment she had made only seconds ago.

In the simplest and crude of terms, she felt like a piece of shit.

"... Your nerves are still in a mess, aren't they," The receptionist from across the room comments, though the words weren't phrased as a question. Unlike her previous poorly timed remark, this time

Loona spoke in a softer voice that resonated sympathy and understanding.

“I- uh… I-I’m not sure… Hang on, I’ll- uh…” Jim stutters nervously, doubts of how this self-treatment would go filling his already shot nerves.

Loona softly exhales through her nose before putting her magazine down, promptly getting out of the office chair and making her way across the room; “Alright. Here, let me do it.”

The maimed young man gave off a parted grin; “W-Wait on a minute, Loona. I’m a grown man, I can do this-”

“Uh- sorry, but no. No, you really can’t,” the hellhound bluntly refutes with a knowing look in her eyes; “I know what you’re thinking; that it’ll hurt like hell or you’ll fuck something up if you do it by yourself. Starting to think I *have* become your designated slave.”

Jim began to feel guilty that Loona felt this way; “Oh.. I see. Apologies, matey, didn’t mean to make you feel that way.”

“Relax! I didn’t mean it like that,” Loona shakes her head as she gently grabs the medical kit, retrieving a few fresh gauzes from inside; “Just making a dumb, sarcastic remark; A bit of self-deprecating humor, you know? I do that kinda thing. Now, lie flat.”

“Loona, listen. Please, I can-...”

“Can you quit arguing with me? Lie down, I’m not asking you anymore-”

“No! I assure you, I don’t need your help. This isn’t your problem, I can do this myse-…”

The continued vocal protest Jim insisted upon ceased, almost immediately noticing Loona’s stern and uncompromising stare that commanded respect for her position, the hellhound stubbornly telling him in a non-verbal fashion to “put up or shut up”. It was painfully obvious to Jim that she was going to perform her “duties”, whether he liked it or not. With a defeated sigh, the young

bushman capitulates, obliging with Loona's order to lie back down on the couch, his eyes averted away while trying in vain to suppress his overt humiliation.

Immediately after Jim positioned himself as he was effectively commanded to, the de-facto "nurse-maid" got straight to work, carefully peeling away the worn-out dressing to expose his injuries, her "patient" wincing slightly as the gunshot wounds were unveiled. In a surpassing of her characteristically pessimistic expectations, it appeared as if the injuries inflicted upon Jim were progressing better than expected, with no signs of infection present. Loona raises her brow at this observation, internally self-congratulating herself for her efforts that had so far paid off. Contrary to her previous doubts from the day before in the heat of the rescue mission she had embarked on, it appeared that her efforts were - in fact - worth it.

Loona immediately moves onto the next part of the process, retrieving a damp rag she had bought with her to daub and wipe the remnant dry blood away, careful not to exacerbate the injuries any further which would be caused if she pressed down too hard. While she continues to impersonate a nurse, a part of her wonders if Jim could possibly need stitches to assist in the healing process, thinking back to a time where Moxxie had sustained a very similar - though comparatively smaller - injury which did result in a handful of stitches. Loona's mind dwells on this very real possibility while discarding the damp rag now covered in flakes of Jim's dried blood, proceeding to dry the damp surface area with a portion of dried cloth contained within the first-aid kit before pulling out a miniscule bottle of liquid antibiotics, promptly unscrewing the white cap to allow for application.

All the while she committed to her task, Jim weakly persisted with his protests; "For goodness sake, is this all necessary?"

Loona immediately responds to this remark, wasting no time with sugar-coating anything to this 'grown-ass man' who was protesting like a child; "I guess that depends on what you'd like! Do you feel like contracting a severe abdominal infection, convulsing in pain for hours on end, your organs shutting down one-by-one until you finally die?"

This blatant scaremongering from Loona about the very real consequences took Jim quite aback, mildly shocking him with the thought; "…I mean, that's a straight-to-the-point way of putting it… No, I suppose."

"Exactly; Which is why I'm doing this for you. Now stop protesting," Loona demands bluntly, the bottle of opened liquid antibiotics hovering over one of the wounds; "Prepare yourself, this will sting."

“Wait for just a min- NGH! Fuck!”

Treatment continues for the next couple of minutes, the human wincing in pain with every individual application of the antibiotics, Loona trying her best to assist him in holding still so the medicine wouldn’t go to much waste. Jim was considerably relieved when this process finished as the hellhound finally applied new gauze patches on his wounds, firmly patting them down to make absolutely sure they would stick.

A firm pat on the human’s shoulder confirmed to him that the ordeal was over, Loona announcing to him that this was the case; “There. We’re done.”

With a grunt, Jim props himself upright against the armrest to examine the hellhound’s handywork, noticing immediately the present tingling sensation of the liquid antibiotics still lighting stinging his wounds; this temporary discomfort, however painful, was necessary if he ever hoped to avoid an infection. It appeared as if Loona knew what she was doing, the first thing clear to Jim was just how free of blood his abdomen was, the dressing patches firmly stuck to his skin in an uncompromising fashion.

He couldn’t help but comment on the seamless result; “Huh… You’ve done pretty good, I gotta say.”

This judgment on the final result caused Loona to shrug as she put everything away; “Don’t remember asking for a critique about it, but thank you. Does it feel comfortable enough?”

“Uhh.. Just a.. slight stinging sensation from the drugs,” Jim informs as he buttoned his shirt back up; “But yeah, look… thanks for doing that for me, I appreciate it.”

Loona couldn’t help but give off a light smile; “Don’t mention it, you’re all good. But seriously though, don’t mention that I did that for you; I won’t hear the end of it from the others, especially dad.”

A brief cackle managed to escape Jim’s lips for a brief moment until Loona’s phone began blaring, startling them both for a split second. The pair of them turn their heads in almost perfect unison towards the desk, finding the cell phone vibrating on top of the table’s surface where it lay, aimlessly shifting an inch every time it buzzes incessantly. The owner of the device swipes it off of the front desk and answers the call, curious as to who it could be; to her disconcertion, the caller ID displayed in clear bold letters confirmed it to be Blitz.

Loona's eyes narrowed in mild perplexion, trying to figure out if the call was a mistake as they had only talked only minutes ago. She was also more than certain that Blitz had stated they'd be away for more than an hour yet, with Moxxie still performing reconnaissance on wherever they were currently when they last conversed, so it couldn't be him asking for a portal to return back to headquarters unless, of course, something had gone seriously wrong.

Without a second more of delay, Loona accepts the call and holds the phone up to her ear; "Yeah, what?"

"You better listen to me in there, you inbred hick!"

The hellhound was left completely speechless, her face quickly turning into one of shock and rage at what Blitz had just outrageously called her, letting of a ferocious snarl which managed to spook the human looking on in bewilderment; "…W-What the fuck did you just call me?!"

"Where the fuck are you two?"

"Fuck that, don't you DARE change the subject! What did you just call me?! Do you have a death wish or something, you little insufferable cunt?!" An utterly furious Loona bellows into the phone, beyond insulted by this sudden outburst of insults, from her own father no less!

"Remember, sweetie; the responsibility is entirely on you."

"Responsibility?! I'm responsible for you suddenly calling me and insulting me after the shit I've put up with from you?! I oughta come over there and tear you a new asshole RIGHT NOW!"

"Remember, sweetie; the responsibility is entirely on you."

"I heard you the first time, asshole! Why the fuck are you repeating yourself?!"

"Remember sweetie; the responsibility is entirely on you."

Although her seething, searing emotions of wrath and extreme outrage continued to blaze within her, Loona began to feel a hint that told her something wasn't quite right here. She couldn't figure out exactly what was wrong just yet, but the way Blitz spoke and the things he was saying didn't align up with each other, his tone of voice changing drastically in between his responses. That was another factor that didn't seem right; the things he was saying. Never once did Blitz ever resort to ever calling her such provocative insults, let alone this suddenly and without any obvious, previous causation. In fact, no; why would he ever call his own daughter an "inbred hick" in the first place?

Suddenly a bizarre, bewildering realization hit Loona with stunning force; Blitz had said these words the day prior, and in the exact same tone of voice as he spoke them today. Everything from the furious, scolding tone of the "inbred hick" comment when herself and Jim were arguing, to the hushed, serious tone of voice when the imp sternly reminded Loona of her "responsibility" - it was almost as if it was a recording, playing over… and over… almost mocking her.

Whoever, or whatever, this was; it certainly wasn't Blitz.

Loona's mouth hung slightly agape at this confounding realization, her brow furrowed while she tried to figure out what was going on; "W-Who is this?"

This time, no response.

Another ten seconds for this apparent impersonator to respond was provided by Loona who carefully listened in, the faint white noise of the call compensating for the lack of noise from either end of this call.

Loona asks again, this time more forcefully; "I said who is this? Don't you dare play games with me! I don't like being fucked with!"

The caller hangs up.

"W-What the hell was that?! Who was that??" Jim asks in bemusement from the sidelines, equally as dumbfounded by the sudden event that had just unfolded.

An immediate answer isn't provided as Loona stared at her phone, completely dumbfounded - if not considerably freaked out by the experience. Nonetheless, she manages to snap herself out of her stunned state, stuttering out an answer; "I… I-I don't know, it sounded like dad. … I don't think it was him, though."

Jim became even more perplexed than he was at this revelation; "W-What do you mean? … Loona, what does that mean?"

"Again, I really don't know," Loona clearly emphasized, trying to make heads-or-tails of what was happening; "He kept repeating words and shit he's already said before. As in, like, it sounded like a recording; same tone and everything."

"So like someone was playing a loop," the bushman inquires, trying to acquire a mental picture of what the hellhound meant.

"Y-Yeah, I guess. … I don't like this at all, something fucked up is happening. This is all starting to worry me," a now clearly unnerved Loona expressed, darting her eyes towards the front door to check if someone could be stalking them.

"Have to agree with ya; safe to say the feeling's mutual. … Hey, uh, another thing. I've been meaning to ask; How… How did you know when to find me at the right time, when you found me bleeding out in the living room," Jim finally inquired with curiosity, the question having nagged him for the past few hours.

In all honesty with herself, Loona had hoped that the topic wouldn't be brought up at all, dreading having to explain the fact they had effectively been hired to assassinate him. Usually, she would have no problem with getting straight to the point with regards to sensitive information; this instance, however, she wasn't so sure. Loona's eyes shifted while she stared at Jim, no doubt uncomfortable with being put on the spot like this as she had no clue how to break it to the wounded casualty without making him panic.

Fortunately for Loona, however, her cell phone once again blared loudly within her hands, conveniently providing an opportunity for her to avoid asking the question right away. She looks down at it with apprehensive hesitation, finding out that it was Blitz calling once again - hopefully this time it was the real deal and not some bizarre impersonator. Thankfully it was, discovering so when she held up the phone to her ear to listen in to her father cheerfully requesting for his daughter to pick them up. Loona let out a sigh before grabbing the grimoire and heading to a more

suitable area for her to summon a portal, but not before ensuring the human that she would provide an explanation to his question soon enough.

How long it would take for her to formulate a proper answer was another battle within itself.

It didn't take much time for a portal to be opened within the summoning room, the first imp to burst through the portal in question being none other than Blitz, carrying within his hands half-a-dozen bottles of water.

"Ah, Loonie! I got a special delivery for a certain dipshit hillbilly by the name of 'Jim'," Blitz sarcastically announces, not even attempting to disguise his dismay for the task he had been assigned to by his own daughter.

Loona couldn't help but roll her eyes, merely gesturing for him to deliver them to the human in the reception room. Blitz does so - albeit begrudgingly - sulking his way outside into the reception as he mumbled something crass from under his breath. The all-too-familiar imp couple are the next two to trudge their way through the portal in perfect unison, though this time neither of them had a scratch on them, signaling that this assassination was a job well-done.

"Sooo, how did you go~," Millie suddenly inquired of the hellhound standing by the portal.

Loona raises her eyebrow; "With what?"

The female imp seemed incredulous; "Ya know what I mean; with your pet human outside! You haven't mauled him to death like a pitbull yet, have ya?"

The hellhound groans dramatically; "Dammit Millie, he's not my fucking pet! Stop calling him that!"

"Then what's Blitz been sayin', huh?" Millie persists with her conviction.

"Oh, come on; you know he can be a moron! Besides, it isn't as if Jim's bothering you," the hellhound receptionist insists, her point firmly embedded.

The female imp raises her eyebrow, confused; “Who says he’s bothering me? It’s Blitz who’s been groaning about his presence all day.”

“I don’t doubt that,” the hellhound receptionist groans, her brow furrowed in exhaustion from her father’s constant insistence to whine; “So I take it Moxxie here didn’t get his ass beat this time, huh?”

Millie, perhaps rightfully so, chooses not to answer this mean-spirited question, instead staring straight ahead while Moxxie slogs behind her, obviously exhausted from a day’s work; A softer part of Loona wondered if she should perhaps lay off him a bit, just for one day. The designated Grimoire handler, Loona, is the last to leave the summoning room after she closes the portal. She finds Jim completely devouring the contents of the first water bottle he grabbed, the remaining full bottles sitting beside him on the couch while he drank as if he hadn’t seen water before!

Blitz interrupts Loona as he drank from the water cooler, plasticine cup still grasped in hand; “So! Any new clients came in while we were gone, Loonie-Tooney~?”

“No, not so far,” Loona informs; “Have to say, though; you guys are back pretty early…”

Blitz sinisterly chuckled at this observation; “Oh, pumpkin; it was almost too easy! Just some decrepit, old freak who had long since passed her expiry date! You shoulda seen it; The way her brains spilled out when Mox blew a hole through her ugly-as-fuck head! HA! Guess that’s what old dickholes like her get when you forcefully euthanize puppies, isn’t it?”

“Ohhh, I see how it is,” Loona begins to remark; “You can make a policy like “kids die for free” but you draw the line at puppies being euthanized? Hypocrisy at its finest.”

Blitz put his hand on his chest in a dramatic fashion; “You may call it hypocrisy, sweetie-pie, but me? I call it ‘having standards’!”

“Pffft- those sure are some ‘standards’…,” Loona scoffs to herself while she rolls her eyes.

“Are you sure we got the right person, sir? I mean, it seemed almost *too* easy,” Moxxie inquired from the foreground, obviously thinking about the job they had just completed with overwhelming success.

Blitz rolls his eyes in response to Moxxie’s doubts; “So what? We got the bitch anyway - easy money you could call it! It’s *miles* better than a challenge where the target is guarded by an army of fiercely-loyal dickweeds, think of it that way. Besides; I got some free expensive-as-fuck air-fresheners out of it,” he adds with charisma as if he had won the lottery, proudly showing off a complete boxful of Black Ice-scented air-fresheners that he had tucked snugly under his coat.

“Wow, air-fresheners… riveting,” Loona couldn’t help but sarcastically remark, her eyes glued to the phone screen; “Hang on, I’ve seen those before in the living world. They’re not expensive at all; they literally only sell for two dollars.”

“Aw, c’mon sweetie, you have to think outside the box! Imagine the possibilities - the bank and seed capital we could make if we sell these at an inflated price, then convince some poor dumbfuck to buy them, thinking that they’re top-of-the-range products!”

Jim couldn’t help except add his own two-cents worth; “So scamming?”

“Pipe down over there, Jim-Boy. You’ve got no idea how to run a bizz,” an overzealous Blitz scoffs emphatically to the human’s dismay. The taller imp turns his head back towards Loona; “Hey sweetie-pie, could you do me a favor please? I’ll pay you in beeeeer~!”

An already “preoccupied” Loona exhales through her nose abruptly as if she had been inconvenienced, the payment method on offer obviously quite tempting; “What.”

With an almost patronizing and borderline degrading voice, Blitz makes his request; “Could you go downstairs and chuck these in the van, pretty pleeease~? Dad needs to figure out what to do with them later.”

“... Fine. It’s not like I have much choice anyway,” Loona reluctantly obliges, the promise of alcohol being the only thing making the unnecessary trip worth it.

With her menial task understood, Loona reluctantly grabs the small cardboard box which was barely any larger than two handfuls before making a beeline straight towards the hallway, pushing the front door open and heading straight towards the elevator at the end. The familiar silence of the building replaced any other noise from the office as the door to IMP headquarters swung itself shut. With a bored expression on her face, Loona jabs the elevator button with her free hand, allowing for the metal sliding doors to swing open. The apparent “designated errand-woman” then presses the button for the ground floor, feeling the sudden jolt of the room descending.

While Loona waited for the room to finish descending and the doors to swing back open, a rather foreboding feeling began to make itself known to the hellhound within her mind. It wasn’t immediately apparent to her as to why she felt what she was feeling, but somehow - deep down within the back of her mind - she knew something, somewhere, and perhaps approaching at an alarming rate, was wrong. It was the same feeling the hellhound had felt that morning with the apparent silhouette behind her, practically mocking her with its mere presence; “that how people with chronic paranoia must feel,” Loona quietly thought to herself as she became increasingly uneasy, albeit only just.

Little time had passed when the doors finally swung open to the ground floor, the occupant with her package immediately heading straight to the car park where the van awaited just outside the entrance doors. She immediately makes her way over to the van outside, feeling the bite of the air hitting her fur the moment she stepped outside. With the van’s keys in hand, Loona unlocks the passenger’s side door manually before swinging the door open, proceeding to place the half-opened box of fool-proof “expensive” air-fresheners within the glove box compartment.

Then something made her freeze in place; a feeling which sent an almost paralyzing, disturbing chill down her entire body.

It was a familiar sense that she had felt many times before, and one that certainly wasn’t inviting. There wasn’t a very specific name for it, but it did have an all-too-recognizable description:

It was the feeling of being watched.

Snapping out of a sudden paralyzed state, Loona shoots herself back up in an alert position! The hellhound’s white and dark-gray fur stood firmly up from the back of her neck and her ears completely upright with intense alertness! Beads of sweat began to accumulate upon her raised brow, all the while her scarlet eyes darted around the immediate vicinity, trying to pinpoint the source of this most unwelcome and foreboding feeling. Time seemed to have no relevance to the current situation, as if it stood as still as she was at that moment which seemed to last for eternity.

That’s when she noticed it…

A cold chill ran up Loona’s back as she noticed the familiar, tall, long-coated figure standing on the opposite side of the car park. His tall silhouette stood as motionlessly as she was, almost mimicking her own upright posture in a bid to mock her sudden fear. His long, dark coat didn’t seem to move with the uneasy wind which blew around them, stabbing cold chills through the female hellhound’s own body.

There was no mistaking who exactly this dreaded, menacing figure was.

“... Oh sh-!!”

Without any hesitation, Loona began sprinting urgently right back into the building, running faster than she ever had before! With great urgency, she practically slides up to the elevator and furiously punches the elevator button numerous times, cursing under her bated breath for the doors to open up faster! With an intense and overwhelming fear, her eyes constantly dart back and forth between the elevator doors finally opening and the tall, wretched, coated figure now standing guard at the entrance, shooting her with the coldest, most intimidating glare that she had ever seen in her life; it was as if the very definition of ‘evil’ lay behind those eyes!

“Ohshitohshitohshit!! COME ON YOU USELESS PIECE OF JUNK, HURRY UP!!” Loona screams fearfully as she practically slips into the elevator! Immediately after throwing herself in, she begins frantically jabbing at the button for the seventh floor repeatedly, helplessly listening to the sound of echoing footsteps emanating, getting ever-closer as the doors finally slam shut!

A temporary rush of relief hit the hellhound as the elevator began ascending once more. Loona begins gasping for breath, trying to focus herself while hastily putting together a plan within her head, understanding her task completely:

Don’t let that horrible bastard find its prey!

RIIIIIIIIINNNNG! … RIIIIIIIIINNNNG! … RIIII-

Click!

“Morrisvale Police Station, this is Sandra. How can I direct your call?

...

Yes, hello. Who is this?

...

Sir? S-sir, hang on a minute, is this an urgent call?

...

Okay. Could you give me your full name?

...

Roy Tanner? ... Okay Roy, I’m gonna need you to explain what exactly is happening.

...

Mhm.

...

What was his name sorry?

...

James Steele.

...

Okay. I see. So he hasn’t shown up at all?

...

Understood. Alright, we’ll send someone up to check on him. If this escalates any further, could you come in for questioning if required?

...

No worries. We’ll keep you updated, Mr. Tanner. ”

Click!

A Threat Like No Other

“Hang on, let me think. … Can you run that by me again, Moxxie?”

“W-Which part, sir?”

“When you looked through the peephole in the door; are you sure that was, well… you-know-who?”

“I… I’m sure of it! Though the next minute, he was gone! Even Millie had a look herself; nobody!”

Blitz let out a ponderous hum as he paced around the room, holding his hands anxiously behind his back while trying to comprehend the troubling developments. During Loona’s momentary absence, Blitz had taken the opportunity to coax Millie and Moxxie into explaining what had happened the night prior to cause them such a restless night. If there was one singular, solitary thing which the IMP CEO took incredibly seriously, it was alleged sightings surrounding potential threats; especially ones involving a certain organized crime boss.

The taller ringleader amongst the small trio of imps massaged his forehead with the palm of his left hand, his right hand practically fastened to his hip. He continues pacing around the reception room, trying to think of a suitable course of action. Many possibilities of what Moxxie could’ve seen ran through Blitz’s head, ranging from anything between Crim actually being there to just a ‘fucked-up’ hallucination caused by excessive fatigue.

Disrupting his deep thought process was Millie, piping up with her own retelling; “I heard him screaming which is what woke me up. Honestly, it sounded like he was being murdered! But that’s not all; as I was leading us both back to bed.. I-I swear to you Blitz, it sounded like Papa was whispering my name from behind the door, but only just above a soft whisper… I don't know how to explain it.”

This unsettling recount struck unease in both Blitz and Moxxie, now seriously considering if someone or something else was at play. A range of probable conclusions stirred within their collective minds, each of them as frightening as the last, if not more. Personally, Blitz had one conclusion which began to sit firmly in the forefront of his mind, the thought of which seemed increasingly less like speculation and more like “confirmed” fact; someone, somewhere, was after

them as a group, as a collective, and it was increasingly inevitable - a matter of time - until the danger was directly upon them.

“This… this is.. This is beyond fucked up, even for my liking,” Blitz remarks rather nervously, his eyes shifting between the front door, his colleagues, and the human sitting hunched-over in the couch, having finally nourished himself with water.

In what was perhaps a bid to assure himself of a sense of direction in the matter, he asks the external source sitting on the couch; “... Do you know what this is we’re dealing with, meatsack?”

Jim raises his head suddenly, squinting his eyes towards the taller imp’s direction; “You talking to me?”

As expected considering the concerning developments in the past twenty-four hours, Blitz was quick to become impatient; “You see any other useless sack-of-meat, bones and shit around here? Of course I’m talking to you! Now make yourself useful and speak!”

The human begins to sneer right back at the imp’s persistent rudeness; “Fucken- You’re asking me as if I would have the faintest bloody clue! How would I know which psychological horror personified you’re dealing with?”

“Ohhhh- I DON’T KNOW! I really don’t know! Do excuse me for trying to figure out how to protect all - and I mean ALL - of us from whatever overlord, or sinner, or whoever-the-fuck, happens to want us all dead for whatever reason!” An incredibly anxious Blitz roars very emphatically, balling one of his hands into a tight fist while leaning up against the wall, feeling as if the pressure of the world was entirely on him!

In a bid to act as the voice of reason, Moxxie interjects his own take; “J-Just a minute, sir, let’s think about this! What would an overlord want from us? And even if this was an overlord, why would they go out of their way to torment us like this? W-Why not just come after us and be done with it?”

Blitz let out a baffled titter to Moxxie’s evaluation; “You speak as if an overlord wouldn’t find doing something like this hilarious; tormenting some worthless imps with visions of those who want nothing but the worst for them, twisting into incomprehensible horrors! ANY cocksucking sicko would get a riot out of that!”

“How do we know if this is even an overlord! As you said; this could also be a sinner for all we know,” Millie points out, trying to be productive with their time.

“He’d have to be a powerful sinner to pull something off like this,” Blitz points out, tapping his nervous fingers repeatedly against the wall; “But even if this is, hypothetically, being caused by a sinner, who could it be? I don’t think I’ve seen or heard anything like this before.”

Suddenly, Millie’s mind drifts towards a possible answer; “… Could it be a Doppelgänger?”

Blitz’s attention is immediately drawn to this possibility; “A double-what?”

“A doppelgänger,” Millie repeats; “Like a mimic of those that we know. If memory serves me right, I think they have the ability to mimic and replicate the forms and voices of others.”

“Oh great, that’s all we need!” Blitz remarks, shuddering unnervingly at the probability of this being the case; “So… hang on; so are you saying that he could be any one of us?”

Millie shrugs; “I-I mean, I wouldn’t go that far, Blitz. I don’t think-”

It was too late for the female imp to give reassurances, however, for Blitz had begun disassociating as he went on a paranoia-filled rant; “That means… that means he-he could be any one of us. H-he could be in this very fucking room as we speak! It could be you! It could be me! No… oh sweet hell, no… Y-You know what this means? It could even be-”

BANG!

The sound of the entrance door being swung open with great force startles everyone within the IMP Headquarters! Everyone present in the room snapped their collective heads towards the doorway to find that Loona had finally returned with a look of intense alarm in her eyes, panting as if having just run a marathon!

Blitz grew mildly concerned with this apparent uneasiness about his daughter; “Loonie! You reckon you could help us o-… Sweetie? W-What’s wrong with y-”

“We have to hide him!”

Blitz became less worried and more confused; “I’m sorry, say what now?”

“You! Get your ass into Blitz’s office and don’t move or make any noise! Don’t come back out until I say so,” Loona urgently barks out her strict order towards Jim, who also was growing concerned at the hellhound’s sudden and unexpected apprehension.

Quite understandably, Jim had questions; “Pardon? W-What’s happening-”

“Stop asking questions! Just do what I say,” Loona with the greatest sense of urgency demands, forcefully slamming the front door shut before making an urgent beeline straight to the couch and hastily retrieving the used first-aid kit!

An increasingly concerned yet still perplexed Blitz looks on as his daughter frantically hides any evidence that a human was present, practically throwing the first-aid kit and imported bottles of water into the bathroom before firmly slamming the door shut!

Blitz decides to try and take charge of the situation; “Now hold on just a second! You better explain to me what’s going on right this instant, young lady!”

Loona gets up into Blitz’s face, glaring at him intensely to get the point across; “Really? You wanna know? You want to know what’s going on right this second?! That.. FREAK client is here! He’s here and he’s coming up as we speak! If he finds out that I’m looking after Jim over there, we’ll all be in the real deep shit, you hear me? We’ll all be in for a world of pain,” she hastily explains, snapping her head back towards Blitz’s office where Jim stood with the door slightly ajar; “Fuck sakes, Jim! Do as I say and get in the damn office!!”

Blitz’s dismay for the chosen hiding spot couldn’t be any more vocal; “You can’t be serious, Loonie; seriously? Does he have to hide in my office?!”

“Yes he does! You’ll just have to suck it up for a minute,” the hellhound bellowed, still in a panic as she ran up to the window looking out into the hallway, peeking through the glass pane towards the elevator in anticipation of the arrival with her face pressed against the glass! Loona observes the indicator just above the elevator doors inching towards the “seventh floor” indicator, almost teasing her with the oppressive suspense that hung in the air.

Loona let out an uneasy heavy exhale as she returned to the reception desk, slumping back down in the chair while trying to compose herself; “Okay.. Okay, let’s just-… let’s all just act natural, and nothing will go wrong, capiche? We know nothing - I repeat, nothing! - about any human that is here. In fact, no; there is no human!”

Perhaps in an unwise decision, Moxxie decides to speak up; “Is this all really necessary? I mean, it’s just a sinner!”

This most helpful comment prompts Loona to shoot the male imp the fiercest snarling death stare Moxxie had ever seen in his life, as if she was going to literally impale him on an imp-sized skewer if he ever dared speak again. In the end, Blitz, Millie and Moxxie collectively agreed to the cover story, though they were still beyond confused - if not mildly concerned - as to what exactly was going on.

They didn’t need to wonder for long as an all-too-familiar sound echoed from outside in the hallway; the monotone chime of the elevator signaling that it had arrived at its destination…

Ding!

That haunting monotone chime signaled the elevator’s arrival like a funeral bell, announcing that the cause of the foreboding suspense was almost upon them, marking the very point in time where everything could change for the absolute worst. Subconsciously, everyone within the confines of the IMP Headquarters knew that any wrong move in this situation could very well affect their own safety, if not their own lives.

…

There was complete deafening silence for the first immediate couple of seconds after the elevator opened its doors, as if the new arrival was awaiting for the right moment to move, much like an animal of prey stalking its next unfortunate meal with near flawless precision. This most uncomfortable silence lasted for what felt like an eternity, until it was broken by another, arguably

more unsettling noise; the faint yet distinctive sound of something large and bulky being dragged sluggishly against the cold, hard surface of the dark-tiled floor. Accompanying the unsettling dragging was the faint guttural sounds of animalistic grunting and wheezing, as if the approaching presence was having trouble breathing.

All eyes were fixated on the front door, greatly anticipating the visitor to make a dramatic entrance, much like other clients they had encountered before. This visitor, despite the anticipation, subverted all of their expectations in the most anticlimactic way possible; as soon as the dragging, grunting and wheezing stopped just outside of the entrance… silence.

…

Knock. .. Knock. .. Knock. .. Knock.

An eerie, abnormally polite knock on the door echoed throughout the room, almost bouncing off the walls in a most unsettling way, as if this newcomer's knocking had its own special way of sounding; almost like it had a personality.

"Uh… Y-You can come in, the doors unlocked," Loona finds herself replying with much hesitancy. Her discomfort was displayed physically as she began hugging herself, holding her forearms tightly with a clearly unnerved look on her face, obviously failing to keep her accustomed stone-cold composure.

After much dreaded anticipation for what was to come, the door begins to open; a dried, long and boney, almost corpse-looking hand clenching the side of the door as it opens. Initially, Millie, Moxxie, and Blitz had expected this mysterious client - the much rumored 'anonymous tipper' - to look much like the others they had encountered; a mad scientist, a crazed ex-teacher, or even a millionaire looking to murder his business partner.

The trio of imps certainly didn't expect the crude, almost nauseating abomination that stood before them, draped in a long, sickly-brown oilskin coat and a pair of worn black brogans.

Loona's eyes widened in awe of just how disgusting and decrepit the 'anonymous tipper' truly was, having not appreciated it fully the last time they had met face-to-face. To describe him as a "living cadaver" would be a gargantuan understatement; the client's cold, blotchy, dark-grayish skin was shriveled and leathery, in some parts of his horrible face creasing so tight, it looked ready to tear. As noted last time, his proportions and facial features appeared unnatural and abnormal; his eyes

sunk in so deep that his vantablack eyes with bright-yellow irises were barely visible, and his shriveled, cracked lips stretched thin and wider than they should, permanently parted as they almost resembled a fixated sneer. His long, thin arms stretched further down than they had any business being, his gaunt hands hanging loosely past the knee. Upon this horrific-looking client's scalp was wiry, clumpy brownish-ginger hair with massive bald patches dotted about, the remaining hair so incredibly thin in places that it threatened to snap off with the briefest of winds.

With a wheezing, animalistic breath, the client stepped politely inside, his arms loosely hanging by his side while observing his surroundings with a cold, analyzing glance. He examines each and everyone present; from Millie, to Moxxie, to Blitz, and then finally to Loona, all of them equally as perplexed and mildly unnerved by this client, the tension in the air almost paralyzing.

Everything was deafeningly silent, until the client spoke in that croaky, low, almost guttural voice; "I apologize for my sudden appearance, ladies and gentlemen. I recognise that you all must be so.. incredibly busy."

Blitz's robust instinct kicks in, taking charge of the energy within the room despite his deep reservations against this newcomer, trying his absolute best to dramatically replicate the client's formality; "Indeed we have been, fine sir! I can see you're a man of formal speaking, I take it?"

The client coldly glares at Blitz, flexing his jaw with a sickening click; "..I suppose you can interpret myself that way."

"Hah! I'm glad to hear that," Blitz replies in an artificial cheerful manner, managing to keep up the facade while extending his hand for a handshake; "I'm Blitz! The "O" is silent, by the way."

The client merely glares with cold indifference; "… I see."

The boisterous imp's toothy grin weakens, retracting his hand with brief hesitation; "Would you like to introduce yourself? I-I mean, we've only just met!"

"… I've already introduced myself enough to your.. dog.. receptionist right over there," the client callously replies, gesturing his crooked hand towards Loona.

Blitz tries to ignore this borderline insulting remark about his own daughter; “So I’ve heard! Loona does such a magnificent job as our receptionist, if I must say so! She’s been handling our clients, like you, with such great performance!”

The client turns his cold, glassy-eyed stare while rigidly nodding his head in “agreement”; “Yeah… magnificent…” He holds this cold gaze for a solid five seconds before pivoting his head towards his left where Millie and Moxxie stood, the two imps analyzing him cautiously; “And who are these two?”

“O-Oh them? Enter stage left Millie and Moxxie, or M&M for short! They’re the muscle and grit to our operations here at IMP; much of what we do here would be impossible without them,” the persistently boisterous CEO explains proudly, managing to maintain his composure despite the stress and apprehension - for now, anyway.

In direct contrast to Blitz’s artificial enthusiasm, both Millie and Moxxie were visibly more apprehensive towards this visitor; Millie wearing a scornful look, while Moxxie to the right of her looked comparatively more nervous.

“Quite…,” the client growls in his croaky, guttural tone of voice, fixating his gaunt, observing eyes upon the two much shorter imps before him, slightly huddled together almost like cornered rats; “You know.. Blitz.. There is something oddly… familiar, about these two right here.”

A wave of anxiety took Blitz slightly aback, disliking the sound of the client’s weary observation; “Is that right, huh? Y-You must have watched our advertisements, then! Heh..”

“In fact.. No,” the client continued, ignoring Blitz’s quick assumption; “... There’s something rather.. Familiar about all of you, especially that… Loona - I think her name was - over there.”

“W-What are you getting at?” Blitz almost immediately asks, a growing fight-or-flight feeling beginning to appear within his mind, obviously sensing an impending danger.

“Oh, come off it, Blitz,” the tall, rotted figure chuckles; “You know exactly what I mean. You’ve truly made a name for yourself with.. With this.. Business of yours. It’s innovative - and I am attracted to… innovation.”

This comment managed to bolster Blitz's internal ego, the encouraging praise causing him to feel slightly more at ease, albeit barely; "Oh! Well, I'm glad you recognise that! I've always strived to be an outlier in a world of dullards and dickhole simpletons."

The client nods slowly; "Hmm. We all want to be an outlier, don't we? A unique performer within a world of simpletons and dullards. … I suppose for you, Blitz, that desire is driven by fear, isn't it..?"

Blitz's facade began to crumble, the realization of what this decrepit visitor had just said unnerving him considerably; "Uhh.. Beg your pardon?"

"Don't act as if you don't know what I'm talking about, mate.. you're terrified of letting down those around you, so you continue this.. facade.. of being jovial and boisterous," the client lectures, his parted sneer growing wider; "You've done it before, little man, and there's a great chance that you will do it again. One name does come to mind… **Fizzarolli**."

A wave of disbelief and terror washed over Blitz like a torrent, his eyes widening in both fear and anger; "H-How the fuck do you know that name?"

"I know many things; a great many things about each and every.. one of you… Moxxie over there, for example… oh, how he screamed when I saw him that night, the little coward. Can't even face his own father," the visitor chuckled, glancing at Moxxie in an attempt at intimidation.

This admittance sent Millie into a furious rage! She began furiously hissing at the sinner; "YOU OUGHTA SHUT YOUR FUCKING MOUTH, YOU DAMN SICK FREAK!"

Immediately, the client's attention is directed towards the firebrand; "And what about you, Millie? That temper of yours… it's unbecoming of many people, I can tell you. By the way.. does the name.. **C**haz.. remind you of someone?"

"RAAAAGH! YOU PIECE OF SHIT," Millie shrieks from the top of her lungs, trying to lunge towards the visitor before being held back for her own safety by Moxxie and Blitz who glared with intense hatred at the sinner before them!

A loud, guttural, wolf-like snarling emanated from the reception desk as it was Loona's turn to speak up! She slammed her fists with brute force against the surface of her accustomed post; "ENOUGH! You listen to me, fuckface, and you better listen well! If you don't leave right now, I will tear out your disease-ridden throat and shove it way up your shriveled ass! Now do yourself a favor, and FUCK OFF!!"

The client's head slowly pivoted towards Loona in an unnerving fashion, cracking his jaw once more before asking; "…Where is he?"

Loona tried to act none the wiser; "Who are you talking about?"

"Don't act dumb with me, girlie. You know exactly.. *who* I'm talking about," the client hissed, his gaunt eyes widening in growing anger as cracks within his cold, calm demeanor began to reveal themselves.

"Nope! I really don't," Loona adamantly persists with the charade, having much better success with hiding her own nervousness; "Now kindly fuck off before I follow up on my threats!"

"… You sure you want to go down this path, girlie?"

The hellhound remained adamant, her piercing, intimidating stare maintained; "Without a second thought."

"Riiiight… You know, Loona… I've also got a.. friend who wants to see you..," the client growls with a wide sneer, before then turning around and swiftly walking right out the door into the hallway, his intentions for this action unclear. The living de-facto corpse appeared to be looking down to his left at something, or someone, who was leaning against the wall of the hallway, his black and yellow eyes fixated on the apparent second presence.

The still anonymous sinner then bent down and snapped his fingers a few times and whistled, almost as if he was calling over a dog; "Psst! Hey! Get up."

A low, pained masculine groan emanates from around the corner, just out of sight; "Agh! Nnnh.. f-fuck you…"

Suddenly the sinner kicked the second presence hard, possibly right in the abdomen! The hostage cries out in pain as the corpse-like entity barks his order once again; “I said get up, ya filthy mutt!”

It didn’t take long for the unknown hostage to get up from the floor, the reanimated cadaver-looking sinner’s head following as his detainee stood up. A wheezing chuckle left his sneered lips; “There’s a good lad,” he remarks, proceeding to grab the hostage by his shoulders and leading him through the doorway. The decrepit, cadaver-like visitor called out to Loona as he pushed the badly beaten male hellhound through the doorway; “Hey, mutt! You recognise this big ol’ bastard? He tried jumping me on the way up here, you know? Couldn’t let him do that!”

Loona looked on in beyond petrified shock and horror at the male hellhound who had obviously been severely beaten, his fur matted and dirtied as stains of his own blood dotted his body in long, splattered streaks. The male hellhound in question looked as if he had been drugged, barely conscious and uneasily swaying on his feet. His good eye struggled to stay open while his scarred eye was swollen shut from being beat.

It was painfully obvious to Loona who exactly this hellhound was…

Loona’s eyes were glued wide-open in despair and disbelief at the distressing image before her, all the while small pricks of tears began to form at the corners of her eyes; “T… Tex? Tex… no… y-you-… YOU ROTTEN BASTARD!”

The hellhound leaps over her desk with breakneck agility, ready to obliterate the sinner holding Vortex hostage! Just before she could get within arm’s reach, the client draws a pistol out from behind his back, aiming it directly over the male hellhound’s bulky shoulder directly towards Loona’s face, the sight of which made the hellhound freeze!

“AH! Don’t you dare come at me like that, ya DOG,” the sinner demands with a blood-curdling voice; his deep, croaky vocalizations almost cracking with anger!

Loona’s mind was in a complete infuriated and emotional mess, her helplessness in this situation overwhelming her thought process while her eyes glowed with red-hot rage!

“Let him go, you sick son of a bitch!! I-I’ll-..! You’ll..! Let him go or I’LL FUCKING KILL YOU!!” Loona shrieks furiously, all the while she had a gun barrel pointed directly at her face!

Blitz quickly drew his twin pistols from under his trench coat, aiming them both directly at the crazed hostage-taker; “Don’t you DARE point a gun at MY daughter, you ballsack-looking asswipe!! I’ll blow out your brains, I-I swear!!”

The sinner lets out a menacing, throaty chuckle before turning the gun away from Loona’s face and repositioning it so that the barrel is pointed against the barely-conscious Vortex’s temple; “How’s this then, Blitz? Much better? … **NOW!** Here’s what's gonna happen, all of you! We’ll.. Negotiate… I’ll spare this.. mangy dog’s life while in exchange, I get James’ location.”

Unsurprisingly, Loona was having none of it; “F-Fuck you! How about that one?? Who are *you* to try and negotiate with us, anyway?!”

The corpse-like sinner gave off an incredulous and surprised look towards Loona; “You haven’t figured it out yet..? **HAHAH!!** Fucken ‘ell that’s a true riot! You certainly aren’t a smart cookie, now are ya, sweetheart?? Come onnn!! You should know who I am! Besides.. I was on your stupid little hit-list, after all! “Well-known criminal”? “Morrisvale”? “Constantly in-and-out of prison?” Do those words ring any bells, luvvy?? **HM?!”**

Something within Loona’s mind almost instantly clicked, and everything began to make sense. A pit within her stomach instantly formed at the moment of realization; “Malloy…”

“**HAH**! That’s right!” Malloy immediately began cackling heartily, finding this torment he was causing the hellhound and her imp colleagues awfully entertaining; “Can’t keep an “Old Dog” down and chained for too long, now **CAN YA?!**”

“The fuck do you want from us, you mad Irish prick?!” Blitz grits his teeth in deep-seated anger, nervous sweat dripping down his face as the deadlock in the situation begins to take hold.

“Just young Steele’s corpse, mate! That’s why I came to you.. pricks.. in the first place,” Malloy sneers with a horrific, animalistic heaving breath periodically between some of his words! In a testimony to Malloy’s remarkable strength, Vortex began to fall increasingly limp within Malloy’s uncompromising and firm chokehold.

This was an opportunity for Loona to bark a question right back, an opportunity which she eagerly took; “Why! Why do you want him so much?!”

Malloy's yellow and black eyes widened in a sign of his deep-rooted insanity; "Sometimes, girlie.. Sometimes.. Civilians get in the crossfire of the criminal underworld, yanno? It's like warfare! Like, for example, this.. big fucker in my arms right now; he decided to rock up at the wrong place.. At.. the wrong time! And soon enough - probably in the next fifteen seconds - I'm going to turn his brains into a fine fucking mi-…"

…

"Well now… Look at who it is…"

Loona and Blitz noticed quickly that Malloy's intense, mad gaze was now fixated behind them towards the direction of Blitz's office. The hellhound glances back behind her in the general direction of the office's door; sure enough, there was Jim, armed with a lever-action rifle which Blitz had ransacked from Malloy's property. Better yet, the human was aiming the old rifle in the hostage-taker's general direction.

"Hello, Malloy.. you rotten old arse..," Jim growled, perhaps ready to shoot at a moment's notice, his voice shaky from all the adrenaline.

"Jim! What the fuck do you think you're doing," Loona asks through gritted teeth in utter disbelief, her voice reduced to a hushed, harsh whisper!

The hellhound's question was ignored completely as all eyes were now set on the sinner, continuing to hold practically everyone present to ransom. Jim speaks again, managing to suppress his fight-or-flight response; "Put the pistol down, Malloy! N-None of us want to get hurt here, now do we?"

From the center of the room, Malloy's wretched, decaying face began to squint with maliciousness and curiosity at the young bushman standing before him, perhaps intrigued by the sheer will of defiance that Jim openly showed against him, seemingly without any visible fear. For a solid, tense, and dead-silent five seconds, both Jim and Malloy glare at each other amidst the viewing of the third-party onlookers. The only sound that emanated was the unsteady, pained breathing from Vortex who was weakly struggling against Malloy's remarkably firm grip.

Malloy was the one to break the tense stand-off; "That's… that's my rifle…"

"Indeed it is, Vick… Now put the bloody pistol down," Jim demands in a low growling tone, his hands beginning to shake with a mixture of adrenaline and fear.

…

“Now, James… James, listen to me carefully… Now as you should know, a rifle.. in the wrong hands.. can be really dangerous.. so, you know.. **GIVE ME THE FUCKING RIF-**”

THWACK!

“**RRRRRROOOOOAAAAAAAAGGGHHHHH!!!**”

In a move that barely anyone expected, Millie jumps up from behind Malloy and smacks him firmly across the head with a frying pan sourced from the kitchen, immediately causing the sinner to lurch back and bellow out in disorientating, unbelievable pain! Immediately he drops not only the pistol, but as well as the injured Vortex within his headlock, allowing the male hellhound to slump to the ground with a heavy “THUD”! All fierce eyes were on the now discombobulated Malloy as he groaned in pain, emanating almost eldritch-horror-like noises which unsettled them all! Nonetheless, Loona sprints up to the dreaded son-of-a-bitch and kicks him off balance from behind his legs, allowing Malloy to collapse to the ground in an awkward fashion; his wretched, twisted joints cracking loudly as if they were breaking like twigs!

Just before Loona could begin sinking her jaws right into the twisted being’s throat, Malloy manages to turn around and punch her with force right in the guts, causing the hellhound to immediately lurch back in pain, hunching over with her arms wrapped around her abdomen! During Loona’s moment of weakness, Blitz aims directly at Malloy’s head with one of his flintlock pistols, pulling the trigger only for the shot to miss his freakish head by mere inches as the sinner twisted around like a reptile with a million joints! Immediately after staggering back up onto his feet, Malloy pounces like a wildcat at Blitz, shoving him firmly into the ground before sprinting up to the window overlooking Imp City and hitting it with the unbelievable brute force of his elbow!

CRASHHHH!

Just before he could make his unconventional escape, Loona forcefully pulls Malloy away from the shattered window, before then sinking her razor-sharp canines right into his shoulder in a bid to fatally wound him!

“**RAAAAARGH!!!**” Malloy gutturally screams out in pain, staggering back into Loona as she flung him around off his feet like an animal of prey! The corpse-like sinner slips out of Loona’s bite, tumbling dangerously close towards Jim who was just about to steady his shaky aim towards Malloy’s grotesque head! Just before the young man could pull the trigger, Malloy manages to snatch the rifle out of his hands, ceasing any attempt to harm the young man and instead staggering up once again towards the broken window!

With his old lever-action rifle grasped in one hand and his wounded, profusely-bleeding shoulder held in his other, Malloy turns back around to face those that wanted to kill him, his back pressed against the window sill! A wide, rotted, crooked smile stretched across his face while letting out the most haunting, menacing cackle; “**HAHAHAHAAAAA!! WOOO!! OH, I SEE HOW IT IS!!** We want to play the long game, huh? **GOOD! I LOVE DRAGGING SHIT OUT!!**”

As soon as Malloy’s short monologue was complete, he pushed himself out backwards through the shattered window, letting out more blood-curdling maniacal laughter as he fell out, plummeting towards the ground below! Loona immediately ran up to the shattered window, poking her head out towards the ground, expecting to find Malloy continuing to fall to his gruesome fate! Yet, as she peered out, Malloy was nowhere to be seen; not even a gruesome, splattered mess on the sidewalk far down below.

It was almost as if he had completely disappeared into thin air.

Loona pulls her head back inside the office, spinning back around to find a scene of the aftermath of a calamity. Everyone within the room was either greatly unnerved or angry that they couldn’t kill that horrible man in time, with the exception of Vortex who was badly beaten and bruised, wincing in agony as he picked himself up from the floor.

“Fuck… NNNGH- FUCK! H-Hey! Is everyone okay? I-Is everyone here?” Blitz repeatedly asks as he looks around the room, trying to catch his breath after the sudden greatly distressing confrontation.

“Y-Yeah.. Yeah, we’re fine, Blitz. AGH! Dammit, I almost had him,” Millie pants while shivering profusely from her moment of pure wrath.

Moxxie points towards Vortex who was composing himself, having since heaved himself weakly onto the couch; “What about him over there?”

Loona let out a light gasp as she ran up to the second hellhound present, urgently checking over his condition; “Tex! Shit- Tex! A-Are you okay??”

Despite his bruising and temporarily weakened state, Vortex managed to nod, waving his hand in kind dismissal to Loona’s worries; “I-I think so.. Sore and bruised, but I-… I think I’ll survive..”

The female hellhound stammered in disbelief at Vortex’s condition - never once in memory had he ever been as badly beaten as this, let alone by a sinner; “Wh- h-how did he manage to beat you up like this?? What did he do to you?”

“I don’t-.. I don’t know. I-I really don’t,” Vortex concedes before covering his mouth to cough, still trying to catch his breath with more success; “I was coming up to get something for Verosika, and… and I guess he came up from-.. Agh!- From behind me? It all happened so fast! Feels like.. feels like I’ve been drugged…”

Just as he finished explaining, Vortex’s lightly-bruised good eye wandered over behind the fellow hellhound in front of him, beginning to squint in perplexity; “Wait… Loona, is that a human behind you?”

“...Oh! Uhh…” Loona looks back over her shoulder towards the human in question who was trying to catch his breath, his nerves quite obviously shot from the sudden encounter and the revelation that there was now someone openly after him; “Uhh, yeah… Yeah, t-that is a human. I-I know it looks bad, but I can explain!”

“You better hope that you can! In fact, no, here’s a bloody question for ya; What the fuck?!” Jim suddenly calls out without much warning, staggering towards the two hellhounds gathered on and around the couch.

Loona’s ears folded back as she inhaled through her teeth, not entirely sure on what to say; “That’s what I was meaning to tell you earlier before that call interrupted us! B-But listen, it’s not what you think!”

In spite of Loona’s stagnation, Jim was quite understandably impatient; “Well, go on!”

The under-pressure hellhound finally began to explain; “Okay! Give me a minute, fuck! … Look, he came around a few days ago with an “anonymous tip” in the form of an envelope, okay? At no point did he ever tell me his name, or who it was he wanted dead. In fact, no; You wanna know something? He flat-out refused to tell me who exactly he was! All he said was that there was a guy “in the way” - whatever the fuck that means - and that I had to wait for “the right time” to open it up and find out who he wanted to hire us for. All things considered, it seems that I *did* open it up at “the right time”, considering that I found you before you could bleed out!”

Vortex’s good eye shifted between the human and Loona standing before him, his consciousness finally returning after the ordeal he had been through; “Hold up… h-how do you know this guy?”

“It’s a long story, I’ll explain later,” Loona was quick to dismiss the question, at least for the moment.

Blitz was quick to grow suspicious of Vortex’s presence, considering that this was Verosika’s personal bodyguard, after-all; “Just here to “retrieve something”, huh? I call bullshit! You’re here to spy on me on Verosika’s behalf, aren’t you??”

Loona was taken aback by this sudden interrogation unfolding; “Blitz, what the fuck?!”

The bulky male hellhound glanced up towards Blitz who was standing by the side of the couch; “Now why would I waste my time spying on you, buddy? I barely even know you.”

To everyone’s annoyance, Blitz persisted with the needless paranoia; “Horseshit! You tell that succubitch boss of yours that there’s nothing for her to see up here! She should know damn well that I’m a force to be reckoned with!”

Vortex couldn’t help but snicker deeply at the imp’s attempt to act tough; “You’re not tryna intimidate me, are ya?”

“Take it as you will, you overgrown hairball,” Blitz growled, while Loona looked on in utter annoyance towards her father’s insistence on picking a fight in what was the most inappropriate time!

Luckily for everyone within the room, the voice of reason by the name of “Moxxie” interrupted this unneeded spat; “Can we stop arguing and acknowledge whatever the fuck just happened?? We have some whack-job sinner after our necks who now knows we have this.. HUMAN down here practically under our- sorry, I mean, LOONA’S protection, and we’re in the mood to argue about fucking Verosika out of all people?!”

The reception room fell into complete silence, everyone within the room solemnly agreeing with Moxxie’s statement.

It was Jim who broke the silence, anxiously running his fingers through his hair; “So what now, then? W-Where do we go from here??”

This provokes Blitz to begin thinking intensely, trying his hardest to think of an urgent solution. All eyes were on the taller imp as he paced back-and-forth in a linear pattern; “… We get help. That’s what we do from here; we need protection, and fast! Who knows when and where that shape-shifting son-of-a-whore is going to strike next, we need to be prepared!”

With this newfound sense of direction, Blitz made an immediate beeline straight to his office! With a firm grip, Blitz grabs hold of the handle with the intention to swing open the door it was attached to. Just before he does so, he hesitates, pivoting around with a final word of warning; “Everyone, listen up! Everything that happens here with relation to anything that happened today STAYS. within. this. room! This includes any - and I mean ANY - talk about that unwashed hillbilly over there! Have I made myself clear?”

Without much room to disagree, everyone present within the room, including Vortex, nods in almost complete unison.

Satisfied with the collective compliance within the room, Blitz opens the door to his office to allow himself to enter inside, shutting it firmly behind him before scanning around the room for something of his. After a couple seconds of pacing around, Blitz at last found it; his cellphone which sat idly by on the top of his desk. The imp briskly strides towards it, proceeding to snatch it up from where it lay before turning it on, proceeding to unlock the phone and bringing up the number pad with urgent haste.

Blitz needed to make a call.

Friends in High Places

Disassociating; the voluntary and or involuntary act of becoming detached from either yourself, those around you, or your surroundings.

This is something that Octavia found a rather eccentric sense of comfort in doing, wandering around the seemingly never-ending hallways of the palace, her phone grasped in one hand while wearing a pair of earbuds, listening to her accustomed music as she strolled aimlessly. The black beanie sat snugly upon Octavia's head while she paced sluggishly, the feeling - or lack thereof - of becoming numb and distant from the environment around her comforting her greatly, allowing for the teenager to temporarily destress; sometimes moderate escapism has its pleasant upsides.

One of her father's servants briskly walked right on past her in the opposite direction, the formally-dressed imp's arms held behind his back, obviously in somewhat of a rush to retrieve something; what that something was wasn't exactly clear to Octavia, nor did she care to find out in all honesty with herself. After all, it was very commonplace to find the odd servant pottering about their business, whether that be a cleaner or the odd head-servant inspecting that everything was in near-flawless order. There were a few instances within Octavia's memory where an imp servant had acted "out-of-line" with regards to common etiquette and practice within the palace walls; Needless to say, what ended up happening to him proved that there was seldom any room for disorder.

With the ever-nagging desire to eat, Octavia found herself gravitating towards the kitchen to fetch a quick snack. Another servant, this time carrying a small pile of neatly-folded laundry, trotted by the owlet as she got closer to the archway entrance to the kitchen, untangling her earbuds' wires as she finally pulled them out of her ears so they wouldn't damage or fray. With a halfhearted grip on the fridge's handle, Octavia lazily swung open the door, the sudden freezing temperature effectively hitting her in the face.

A quick glance into the shelves of the fridge reveals a mildly surprising discovery; sitting lonesome on a plate wrapped in cling wrap was a singular crepe, practically waiting for Octavia to claim it as her own. It didn't look to have been sitting in the fridge for too long, either, perhaps less than a day old. The lightly-powdered icing sugar sat loosely on its surface like flaky snow upon the branches of a fir tree, topped off with whipped cream sandwiched between the folds.

"Huh, nice.." Octavia quietly vocalized to herself, deciding to retrieve the newly-claimed crepe out of the fridge and tearing off the cling wrap it was encased in.

Somewhat skeptical of its quality, the owlet takes a hesitant small bite of the crepe, trying to determine if consuming it further would render her sick. Fortunately for her, it appeared that the cold pastry within her hand was of adequate quality; if anything, it still tasted somewhat fresh. Octavia shrugs, deciding to take another bite with plate in one hand and her snack in the other, returning to her mindless stroll through the lengthy hallways in the direction she had come from.

Just as she rounds the corner back out into the hallway, she almost runs right into her father who was just about to enter the kitchen himself.

Immediately after noticing his daughter's presence, Stolas becomes jovial; "Oh, Via! Hello! I haven't seen you all morning."

Octavia let out a light smile; "Heh, morning to you too, dad. Yeahhh, I may or may not have been sitting in my room for the past four hours."

Stolas appeared confused by the notion; "Oh? Is that so? Now why would you do a thing like that on such a gorgeous morning?"

"Eh, no reason," Octavia concedes, swallowing another bite of the pastry in her grasp; "Suppose I felt like staying in bed. The dumb teenager urge to stay in bed, you know?"

Her father let out a light hooting chuckle, slowly walking alongside his daughter down the echoing hallways; "Ohoho! I am quite familiar with that feeling, not to worry; I was once your age, after all. Suppose I still do feel that way on the odd occasion. .. And I see you found the crepe I left for you, hm?"

"Mm! You left this for me?" Octavia asks with a near mouthful of pastry.

"Indeed I did! I instructed one of our servants to save it for you specifically," Stolas beams, satisfied to see his daughter enjoying the dessert; "I do trust that it is still adequately fresh?"

"Seems to be," Octavia replies, before giving off a small, grateful smile; "Thanks, dad."

Her father smiles happily, letting off a light chuckle; “Not to worry, my little owlet. .. Um, do excuse me, Via, however I must inquire about something that has left me… intrigued.”

Octavia stops alongside her father, continuing to finish off her pastry; “Hm? What is it?”

Stolas’ facial expression wore a look of moderate suspicion; “Do forgive me for asking, Via, but I have had a look within your bedroom, and I found a… rather interesting taxidermy sitting by your bedside. From what I can gather, I believe it to be a small living world sparrow, though I’m not sure of the species exactly. Would you mind telling me where you acquired such a statue?”

The owlet’s stomach dropped slightly, knowing full well which taxidermy her father was referring to. Her eyes shifted a little, trying to figure out what to say; “Uhh… Loona bought it for me.”

A hint of suspicion emanated from Stolas’ eyes; “She bought it for you?”

Octavia had no choice but to continue the improvised cover story; “Yeah! A-As a gift from a taxidermy store, when we went out shopping that one night together.”

Unfortunately for her, Stolas continued to seem unconvinced, if not more suspicious; “… And how would a taxidermy store down here acquire the carcass of an animal from the living world?”

Now the owlet was truly put on the spot, her father’s growing suspicions putting further pressure on her to tell the truth as to where she had acquired the quaint statue. Octavia averted her eyes away from her father and off to the side, trying her hardest to suppress the fact that she was hiding something.

In a clear stroke of sheer luck, Stolas’ attention was suddenly averted as a servant approached them with the intention to speak. The imp takes a moment to clear his throat politely before being given permission to speak by his master.

“I sincerely apologize for the intrusion, sir,” the servant shyly begins, choosing his words carefully; “I am here to inform you that there is a rather urgent caller that has requested for you to answer.”

“Oh? And do you know who this caller is?”

“H-He didn’t say, sir. All he instructed me to do - quite rudely in fact - was to send for you to answer. He said that you know him,” the servant informs.

Stolas’ eyes shift in a hint of apprehension, acquiring somewhat of a bad feeling about the nature of this call and who it could possibly be; “I-I see. I shall answer immediately, thank you for informing me.”

The servant obliged by giving a polite nod in acknowledgment, trotting back to where he had come from, following closely behind his master who made his way to answer the call. Octavia narrows her eyes to a light confused squint, finding herself growing curious as to who would want to “urgently” talk to her father. With the desire to find out, the owlet decides to follow along from a safe distance, a feeling of concerned anticipation brewing within the back of her mind. Octavia watches on as her father, accompanied by the much shorter servant, strides towards the study room where the phone sat waiting for them, the receiver off the hook as it lay on the surface of the table it sat upon.

Immediately, Stolas picks the phone up from where it sat, proceeding to raise it up to his ear. His daughter, meanwhile, watched on from a safe distance so she wouldn’t intrude.

Octavia watched on as the exchange between her father and the unknown caller began:

“Hello? … Hello, yes. … Who is this, sorry? … Oh! Blitzy! W-what a most pleasant surprise~!”

The mere mention of that certain imp made Octavia groan dramatically, mentally preparing herself for the obnoxiously suggestive exchange of words that would inevitably ensue between her father and his “pet”.

“I-I don’t know what to say! Is there something you would like my little, rambunctious im-… Pardon me? … W-what was tha-… Wait a moment, Blitzy, do calm down! What’s going on?”

Octavia watched on with intrigue as she observed her father’s facial expression resonate that of excitement and bashfulness, to that of worry and puzzlement. Despite hearing nothing in relation to the conversation being had, the owlet could most certainly tell that whatever it was, wasn’t good.

“A sinner, did you say? … I see, so-.. mhm? … That powerful? Are you sure? … That is worrying. … Understood. Do not fret, I-I’ll be right over.”

A perplexed look sat on Stolas’ face as he hung up the phone, wondering what exactly was in store for him at that certain part within Imp City; from the sounds of things, it certainly didn’t sound good. The owl turns around from where he stood, preparing to open a portal, but not before noticing Octavia standing by the doorway, quite obviously troubled by the nature of the sudden call herself.

“Dad? W-What’s going on?” Octavia seemed more perplexed than worried at this point, at least for the moment.

In return to his daughter’s question, Stolas gave off a half-hearted reassuring smile; “I-It’s nothing to worry too much about, Via. Just something with regards to some business I have to attend to.”

Quite understandably, Octavia wasn’t at all convinced; “That.. didn’t sound like “nothing”.”

Now it was Stolas’ turn to feel put on the spot, unsure of what exactly to say to his own daughter, not wanting to concern her with urgent business regarding Blitz; he knew exactly how uncomfortable she was with Blitz, despite his feelings towards that certain imp. That’s when he remembered that he needed to be more open with Octavia, a promise he had made to himself very recently. In spite of his reservations of the idea, Stolas let out an abrupt sigh before finally explaining.

“Blitz has urgently requested for me to come see him regarding one of his customers. I’m not entirely sure what the problem is, however from the sounds of things, it seems quite serious,” he clarified to his daughter before him.

“No. No! I’m sorry, dad, but you’re NOT putting yourself in danger again over HIM,” Octavia emphatically protests, perturbed by the mere notion of her father putting himself in danger once again, let alone getting involved with Blitz’s specific line of work.

Stolas was surprised by his daughter’s visceral reaction to his explanation; “Via, I-”

“Just- stop! Stop it with all these excuses, dad, it’s incessant with you! W-What if you finally get yourself killed this time??”

This sudden, thought-provoking question stuns Stolas, halting him dead in his tracks. He examines Octavia standing before him, her face wearing an expression of sheer annoyance and concern; it was painfully obvious to him that his own daughter was greatly affected by trips like this, especially regarding sensitive topics such as potential threats against his life. It wasn’t as if Octavia’s grave reservations were unjustified, either; what if the threat was far greater than he was anticipating? Then again, what was the true extent of the danger, considering that this was a mere sinner, after all? In saying this, what if this wasn’t just some “mere sinner”, and was instead something much more powerful than Blitz had claimed over the phone?

“... I’m sorry, Via. I have to go.”

“Dad?!”

A portal opens before Stolas, leading to the elevator up to IMP Headquarters; “I won’t be long, I promise!”

“DAD!!”

Unfortunately for Octavia, despite her best vocal protests, she watched on helplessly as Stolas stepped right through the portal, promptly shutting behind him when he had fully gone through. Octavia was left alone within the study room, practically frozen in utter disbelief of her father’s insistence to ignore her deepest concerns.

“NNNGAAAH!! For FUCK sakes!!” Octavia yells out in pure angry frustration, impulsively smashing the empty plate to the floor with a loud, reverberating smash!

The owlet inhaled and exhaled heavily as she stood all alone within the walls of the study room, running her fingers through her hair in a bid to calm herself down. Although the urge to go berserk with overwhelming anger was definitely tempting, the much smarter side of Octavia decided that she needed to take charge of the situation at hand, and get to the bottom as to what was going on. Almost immediately, the ponderous owlet knew exactly how she would attain this information.

And with that, Octavia let out a frustrated, gruff exhale, marching off right back to the kitchen where she had left her phone, intending to put the device to good use.

Back at IMP was a scene of uneasy calmness, with everyone present still shaken up by the encounter they all unwillingly bore witness to. Moxxie was in charge of aiding Millie by calming her down in a soothing manner, the female wrath imp having been riled up to the maximum at the mere taunt of Chaz's name which stabbed into her very being like a newly-sharpened machete. The two imps had retreated into the confines of the meeting room so as to give themselves much more privacy. Vortex meanwhile was stretching his sore joints, still feeling severely weakened by whatever supernatural effect had been set upon him like a paralyzing drug. The bodyguard had been in many a fight with a range of people, including sinners, but never once had he come into contact with someone like the sinner that had taken him hostage through some overwhelming strength and ability.

Meanwhile, Loona had resorted to keeping guard by the entrance of the office, keeping a keen eye out for any possible further intruders with ill intentions. Her eyes glared intently at the elevator doors towards the end of the hallway, confirming to herself that the indicator above the door wasn't moving which would signal someone new approaching. Every now and then she'd check up on both Vortex and Jim's condition, asking them both if they needed anything in particular. At least for the moment, both fellow hellhound and human sitting on opposite sides of the couch assured Loona in appreciation for her consideration that they didn't need any assistance.

With his good eye, Vortex pivots his head to cautiously examine the human next to him, sitting in a hunched over posture on the couch, his hands clasped together tightly with his right leg bouncing incessantly, signaling to Vortex that he was rather anxious - perhaps rightfully so. The male hellhound's attention is then fixated on the large dried-blood patch staining his blue button-up shirt, a question emerging within his mind upon noticing it.

"Who did that to you?"

Jim shoots his head up to the sound of a masculine voice to the right of him, obviously coming from Vortex. He nervously turns his head towards the bulky hellhound, trying his best to keep his nerve; "I-I'm sorry?"

Vortex repeats his sudden question; "Who did that to you, the- the blood on your shirt?"

The young bushman wasn't sure as to whether or not he should answer, not fully trusting the hulking figure opposite him on the couch. Despite these reservations, Jim answers; "… Someone shot me."

"Who did?"

"… About three men. They came in the afternoon, yesterday," Jim bluntly replies while he briefly scratched under his chin.

This information took Vortex lightly aback, not entirely sure what he was expecting. From what he could gather with the information that he had, as well as the first-hand encounter that he fell victim to mere minutes ago, there was definitely a connection between this human, what had happened to him, and the sinner that had jumped out the window and vanished into literal thin air.

Vortex decided to ask another follow-up question; "And… so Loona saved you, did she?"

"She did," Jim nods; "Here's my question; why do you care?"

"Just asking, tryna keep my mind off what just happened," the male hellhound explained his intentions; "I can see in your eyes that you're nervous about this… this whole thing. I assure you, though, you've got nothing to fear from me."

"Right."

"… I'm Vortex, by the way."

"… Jim."

"Jim? Didn't that guy call you James?" Vortex was trying to get to the bottom of this, trying to diverge the topic away from the troubling calamity that had unfolded.

“That’s my formal name,” Jim corrects the curious hellhound; “I usually just go by Jim. It’s simpler, like how Loona seems to call you “Tex”, you know?”

The second party in this sudden conversation nods his head slowly, slowly pivoting his head away from the human to stare aimlessly at the floor. Blitz’s muffled voice emanated from within his office, obviously talking to someone for some sort of assistance in the high-stakes tense situation. Without much prior warning, Vortex’s attention is drawn back towards Jim to the left of him by a question that had been asked.

“Who did that to ya?”

Vortex was none the wiser as to what Jim was referring to; “What?”

“The, uh.. you know..” Jim then uses his right hand to gesture towards his left eye.

Vortex was quick to realize what the human was inquiring on; “Oh, the eye? Some other hellhound I got into a massive fight with some time ago.”

“Ah,” Jim vocalized his acknowledgement to this fact; “... So, you’re uh.. Verosika’s bodyguard, are ya?”

“Yup. That’s right,” the male hellhound confirms; “Why, what about it?”

The young man shrugs; “Nothing, just tryna figure out who you are. That shortarse, Blitz; he’s obviously annoyed with you being here.”

“Hah! When’s he ever not annoyed,” Vortex scoffs, letting out a brief titter; “I’m surprised he hasn’t killed you yet!”

Jim couldn’t help but wryly chuckle; “You know chief, I wouldn’t hold my breath if he decided to later on.”

“Too right,” the wounded bodyguard snickers, turning his head back towards Loona who was still standing on guard by the door; “Everything clear so far, L?”

“So far,” Loona shrugs with her back leaning against the doorframe, her scarlet eyes fixated firmly on the elevator; “Y-You sure you’re not too hurt, Tex?”

Vortex couldn’t help but find endearment in the female hellhound’s concern for his health, giving off a light smile despite the pain still emanating from his cuts and bruises; “I’ve had bigger fights than that, Loona, I reckon I’ll survive this stint.”

Loona’s tough and alert demeanor began to crack momentarily, a hint of shy awkwardness beginning to emanate from her; “I-I know! I’m just-.. just checking, I guess. Eheh..”

Vortex shrugs; “That’s fair. Thanks for checking on me anyway, it’s much appreciated.”

Although the male hellhound had merely expressed gratitude for Loona’s common courtesy, it was just enough to begin flaring up her bashfulness, a light blush beginning to spread across her cheeks. The female hellhound slightly raised her shoulders and turned her face away from Vortex, trying her absolute hardest to hide her true feelings, once again proving to herself that the crush she had for the well-built and taller hellhound would never diminish.

Interrupting the uneasy stillness was Blitz, storming back out his office to address the two hellhounds and the accompanying human; “Alright, listen the fuck up; especially you, Jim-boy! I’ve just rang for someone to come over to help us sort out this mess, he should be here any minute. Gonna have to give you two dickweeds on the couch a warning; if you try fuck with him, he WILL obliterate you both!”

Jim was quite understandably stunned by this sudden dump in information; “… Say who now?”

“That reminds me! You’re gonna have to actually try hiding this time; no more of these stupid fucking stunts where you suddenly come out “guns a-blazing” when we SPECIFICALLY tell you to hide!” Blitz strictly informs the human sitting on the couch, still annoyed by Jim’s attempt to play the hero roughly ten minutes ago.

“You’re talking about Stolas, aren’t you?” Loona inquires, already knowing the answer.

Blitz nods; “Yup!”

Loona turns her attention fully back towards the elevator, noticing the indicator above the door increasing steadily; “I’m guessing that’s him in the elevator coming up now?”

“Most likely.”

A bad feeling began to rise within Jim; “Fucking- WHO??”

Blitz wasn’t in the mood for questions, practically forcing the human to get off the couch and march towards the bathroom; “Just hide in the bathroom and you’ll be okay, capiche? And LISTEN when I order you not to reveal yourself to this guy!”

Jim was growing increasingly nervy about the potential threat to himself imposed by the incoming visitor, trying his hardest to ask questions as he was cornered right into the bathroom; “Again, who is this guy-”

“JUST- shut up and hide!” Blitz snapped, quickly slamming the door shut to seal Jim inside.

Loona became instantly agitated by her father’s incessant rudeness; “For fuck sakes, do you have to be such an asshole all the time?!”

“What? He’s the one wanting to ask dumb questions!”

Interrupting this brief spat was the sound of the elevator chime echoing from down the hallway, the metallic doors rolling steadily open to reveal that Stolas had indeed arrived. The towering figure strutted down the hallway in an upright posture, ready to get to the bottom of whatever calamity his most favorite, rambunctious imp had gotten himself into this time. The first individual he spots waiting within the doorway was Loona, who was glancing up at him with a serious expression on her face.

“Oh, Loona! it is wonderful to see you again,” Stolas greets, his hands clasped together behind his back; “Your father wished to see me, something about a client of yours?”

“Yup, that’s right. Happened roughly ten minutes ago now, started trying to kill all of us over, uh.. money or some crazy shit like that,” Loona goes on to explain, determined to keep Jim’s presence a secret.

“Oh dear.. I see,” the newcomer acknowledges, rubbing his chin in thought; “I also understand that this one is.. rather powerful?”

“Seems that way,” Loona conceded before gesturing towards the shattered window; “He jumped right through that window there, smashed it right open. I went to see if he had landed, turned into a gorey, sickening mess on the sidewalk. I literally looked right down; nothing! Literally disappeared into thin air!”

“Hm.. That certainly is interesting,” Stolas ponders, taking it all in. His thought process is momentarily as his eyes shift to find Blitz standing behind his daughter; “Oh, my dear Blitzy! How wonderful to see you!”

“Yeah yeah, hello Stolas,” the usually energetic taller imp greets bluntly, wanting to get this over with himself, desperate for an applicable solution; “Look, serious talk now. Loonie’s right; we’re in some deep shit and we need all the help we can get.”

Almost with immediate effect, the owl managed to replicate Blitz’s seriousness, composing himself and stowing away his bashful feelings for a more fitting occasion; “Ahem- Uh, s-so I’ve heard! Do you know who exactly this particular sinner is?”

“Just some mentally deranged Australian that came to us a few days ago. Goes by the name of “Malloy”, or something dumb like that,” the imp CEO elaborates, playing along with Loona’s attempt to hide Jim’s presence.

“Understood. … And who might this unfortunate hellhound be?” The newly arrived high-profile visitor refers to Vortex, the ‘unfortunate hellhound’ in question was observing the newcomer with a stare of intrigue and wariness.

“Who? This big fucking hairball? Don’t mind him, he was dragged in here by that sinner as a hostage. Managed to get himself beaten-up and drugged, at least by the looks of it,” Blitz wryly explains to Stolas, to the sheer annoyance of Loona standing by the sidelines.

Vortex continues to glare suspiciously at Stolas, not trusting his intentions amidst lower-ranked beings; “So this is Stolas, huh? You’re one of those “high-society” types, aren’t you?”

“I suppose you can call me that,” Stolas formally confirms, trying his best to be as polite as possible; “Would that be a source of trouble for you?”

Vortex huffs, not impressed by the royalty’s attempt to be friendly towards him; “That depends; you’re not here to cause any trouble, talk down to us as if we’re nothing but dirt, are you? Because if you are, then I guess there will be a serious problem on our hands.”

Loona was quick to react to the sudden tension within the room; “Woah woah, Tex, chill out! Don’t worry, he’s cool with us.”

“Ohh, is he now..” the suspicious hellhound incredulously replies, not once shifting his judging glare away from the upper-class figure towering over him.

Perhaps fortunately enough for Vortex, the feeling of suspicion and passive-aggressiveness wasn’t mutual, with Stolas being more perplexed by his behavior if anything else; “Now now, good man, there’s no need to be apprehensive about me. Loona here is correct; I am, how she put it, “cool” with you all… d-did I use that phrase correctly?”

“Eh, close enough,” Loona lightly snickers, pitying Stolas’ attempt at using less formal language, yet finding it oddly endearing.

“Ahem! Anyway!” Blitz was quick to interrupt; “So yeah, Stolas, is there any way you could help us out with this, at least, like, give us some form of protection against this fucking lunatic?”

Stolas began to ponder, thinking upon the proposition to weigh out his options. It was definitely within his own best interests to help out a very close friend of his, considering the fact that the assassin imp before him had supported him on numerous occasions, including but not limited to finding his own daughter in the living world not too long ago. Suddenly, another thought had

appeared within Stolas' mind; a begging voice calling desperately for his safety, sounding much like Octavia.

"Stop it with all these excuses, dad, it's incessant with you! W-What if you finally get yourself killed this time??"

The sheer worry and desperation within Octavia's voice was heartbreaking, almost causing him to begin choking up because of it; he didn't mean to anguish his daughter like this, over some crazed sinner's apparent desire for ransom money from Blitz. Even then, something within Stolas' mind told him that the imp wasn't telling the entire truth as it was, as if he was hiding the real reason as to why this "Malloy" was out there with a vengeance.

…

After a couple more seconds of solemn stagnation, Stolas delivers his verdict.

"… Blitz, I.. I shall protect you. If that sinner ever comes back to harm you, urgently contact me and I shall immediately come to your aid."

Blitz let out a huge sigh of relief, the weight of the world's anxieties lifting off his shoulders almost instantly; "Oh thank fuck! Thank you so-so much! Knew I could rely on ya!"

Despite his reservations on the decision he had just made regarding facing up to a seemingly more powerful sinner, Stolas let out a soft smile and a nod; "Of course, anything that you need. Now, this is where I must depart; I do have some business to attend to, after all."

"Fuck, I can only imagine," the imp groans, paining himself to imagine the monotonous bureaucracy Stolas must have to suffer through; "I'll see ya around, your highness~"

"Hm. Indeed we shall, Blitzy.. indeed we shall."

Stolas solemnly obliged by the farewell, though he was in no mood to return the flirtation advanced onto him, the thought of having upset Octavia weighing him down immensely. His own daughter,

the owlet that relied on his care and compassion as a father, had been let down by her own personified paternal guide. Without further delay, the owl then proceeds to open a portal before him, leading right back into his palace, proceeding to-

Thump!

Stolas pivots his head towards the direction of where the sudden muffled noise had emanated from; the bathroom.

Oh shit…

An intense silence overwhelms the room as the owl prince stares inquisitively at the bathroom door; “W-What was tha-”

“Nothing!! It’s nothing!”

Stolas looks back towards Blitz who had just rudely interrupted his question; “I beg your pardon?”

Blitz was practically sweating bullets, trying desperately to find an excuse for how to explain the source of the noise with a nervous smile; “I-I mean, it’s just some inconsiderate dickholes on the top floor! Yeah! Eheh- t-they’ve been making sudden noises like that all day! I’ve been tryna tell them to shut the fuck up, but who’s gonna listen to me, r-right??”

“Uh-huh..” Stolas vocalizes, obviously not convinced; “Then why did it sound like it came from the bathroom?”

“Ummm…” Blitz darts his nervous eyes towards Loona, who was just as nervous as he was. He darts his eyes back towards Stolas towering over him with his arms folded; “Umm… a-a-acoustics??”

“… Blitzy, is there something you’re meant to be telling me?”

A nerve-induced bead of sweat slid down the side of the imp's head, feeling as if he had been shell-shocked. If there was anything that was near impossible at this point, it was trying to convince Stolas of a lie. On numerous occasions had the owl read Blitz like a book from cover-to-cover to an almost terrifying degree, proving that he had a knack for seeing right through people, almost as if it was a power of his. Unfortunately for Blitz, it seemed as if there was no way out of this.

The taller imp rubbed the back of his head timidly; "Uhh… You can explain, Loonie."

"WHAT?!"

"What do you mean 'what'?? You started this whole shitfest by bringing him here!"

Loona snarled fiercely, acting as if she had just been personally insulted; "You take that back right now!!"

Stolas was now less suspicious and more perplexed; "I beg your pardon, bringing who here??"

Blitz decided to elaborate a little more - perhaps too much; "I'm not explaining anything! That's Loonie's responsibility, considering the fact she thought it was a good idea to bring a HUMAN here!"

Loona's mouth hung agape, her bright scarlet-red eyes once again furiously piercing Blitz's very being, in utter disbelief of just how abrupt her father's delivery of the big reveal was!

Stolas was just as surprised, if not more so, turning his stunned gaze towards the female hellhound behind him; "You bought a what here?!"

Loona folded her ears back while a strained look appeared on her face, trying her hardest to think of where to begin. At that very moment in time, the hellhound swore she could wring that little imp bastard's neck so tight until it snapped in half, as payback for his betrayal - of his own daughter no less - in the current subject matter! With all eyes firmly locked onto her, Loona felt as if she had no choice but to fess up.

“AAGH- Okay, FINE!! If you really wanna know; YES, there’s a human in there, and yes, I bought him here! B-But for good reason! Just.. just, don’t try to hurt him, okay? He’s been through enough,” Loona requests almost desperately.

Contrary to her expectations however, Stolas seemed almost confused by the request; “.. Loona, dear; who said I have any intention to harm this human?”

The female hellhound reacted in slight surprise; “You don’t?”

“Absolutely not,” Stolas reassures before continuing; “But.. but as much as it’s not my intention, you must understand that having a human within this realm is no small thing, either; to be frank with you, this is something incredibly serious. For all of our collective sake, I shall keep this a secret. All of us here should do so, including you by the couch.. what was your name again?”

“Vortex,” the male hellhound bluntly responds.

Stolas nods, making a mental note to remember the name just in case; “Understood. By the way; would you mind bringing him out from hiding, Loona? I feel I must speak with him.”

“Not a chance, mate!!”

A guttural, masculine voice full of fear sounds off from within the confines of the bathroom, signaling to everyone present that Jim wasn’t going to cooperate.

“Come on, Jim, he isn’t gonna hurt you! You can trust me,” Loona tries to reassure, approaching the bathroom door.

“No, no, I trust you! Just can’t say the same about that pommie-sounding eldritch *bastard* out there!”

“Hm. Charming man, isn’t he?” Stolas mumbles under his breath.

With an exacerbated sigh, Loona rubbed the bridge between her eyes; “Just- come out, will you?? He just wants to talk. It isn’t like you got much choice! He’s probably our only chance at a form of protection against Malloy!”

Jim let out an exaggerated, sarcastic laugh; “Hah! Oh, that’s certainly reassuring, isn’t it? … Fine, I-I’ll come out. But if he fucking touches me!”

An anticipation-induced quiet settled within the room as all eyes were fixated on the bathroom door, observing as the door cautiously opened with a long and drawn-out metallic creaking. A pale human hand emerges from within the bathroom, immediately finding its grip on the corner of the door as more and more of the hand’s owner re-emerges from his designated hiding place. It was soon obvious to everyone present that the young bushman was absolutely petrified of the tall, lanky Stolas standing before him, his eyes growing ever-wider as he examined the owl intensely, trying his resolute best not to lose his sanity. The glorified audience awaits for the human to speak once more, Loona standing alert close by in case any intervention was needed.

Putting on a brave face, Jim begins to speak, albeit with a painfully obvious nervous stammer; “R-Right.. I’m.. I’m here! W-What.. What did you want to s-..say to me??”

Stolas hesitates for the moment, carefully examining the terrified human in front of him, perhaps taking pity upon him. The first most noticeable thing the owl notices is the dried blood staining his blue shirt, the dark-crimson practically fused with the fabric.

This was the source of Stolas’ first inquiry; “Oh dear.. That does look painful.”

“I-It was painful enough,” Jim stutters, still shivering in overwhelming fear; “Is.. i-is that all ya bought me out here for; to ask bleedin’ obvious questions?”

Stolas chooses to ignore the blunt remark; “Did you want me to have a look at the wound-”

Jim suddenly snaps in self-defense, jabbing a terrified finger towards the owl’s face; “AH!- Don’t you fucken think about it! I-I swear, mate; if you touch me-”

Stolas lifts his hand up in an effort to quieten Jim and ease his worries, taking charge of the situation by staying calm; “I won’t do anything that you’re not comfortable with, I assure you. All I

want to do is to check if your injuries are manageable."

Despite the assurances, Jim was adamant in his protest; "Loona's already assured that for ya, mate; there's no need to check."

For whatever reason, Stolas seemed surprised; "Is this true, Loona?"

The hellhound gave a hesitant shrug, not wanting to fully admit to it in case of accusations of "becoming soft" from the usual suspects; "Uh.. yeah, I guess? I wasn't going to let him bleed out, that's for sure. What other choice did I have??"

Blitz childishly mumbles from behind Stolas, something along the lines of "you could've left the unwashed, disease-ridden hick for dead and saved us all the trouble". This thinly-veiled crass comment prompted Loona to shoot the imp yet another aggressive, scolding glare - a clear and very emphatic sign to Blitz that perhaps he should shut up immediately.

Stolas persisted with his investigation; "That is very commendable, I must say. But still - do inform me, Loona, for I am still rather confused - ..what possessed you to come to this human's aid?"

This was perhaps the umpteenth time that Loona had to explain herself, and by this point it was becoming increasingly monotonous. The hellhound decides to say nothing, instead approaching the front desk to retrieve something from within the drawer. She pulls the drawer out, immediately finding what she was seeking; the former "anonymous" tip.

Immediately after grabbing it, Loona returns back to Stolas and hands the letter to him, wearing a deeply serious expression; "You really want to know what made me? It's right here. Read it."

With initial minor hesitation, Stolas gently grabbed hold of the letter, beginning to analyze the contents of this article, which was more evidence of attempted murder if anything by that point. He began to notice how intricately written this article of paper was, beginning to take note that it seemed much less of a letter, but more of a disturbing manifesto of a truly deranged madman. The further Stolas continued to read, the more he felt perturbed by this entire situation, if not physically sick by the disturbing nature of the paper grasped in his hands.

A shiver ran up Stolas' spine as he finished the letter at the address listed, looking back up toward the direction of Jim; "So this letter… this letter was about you, was it?"

"From what I've been told," Jim shrugs, eyeing the tall lanky figure staring at him.

Stolas seemed baffled, his eyes squinted in confusion; "I-I don't understand. Despite your blatant rudeness towards myself.. y-you don't seem like an individual who would be, well.. worth killing?"

"Because he isn't," Loona bluntly interjected with deep seriousness, leaving no tolerance for speculation; "That's the point I'm trying to make. He's the victim of some fucked-up circumstance that he has no control over, and it's entirely on me whether or not he makes it out of this alive!"

Blitz couldn't stand to hear this admission; "Dammit sweetie, why?! Why must you put yourself in harm's way over THIS moron? If that Irish bastard wants him dead, so be it!"

Loona growled angrily, her eyes flickering with anger towards her stubborn, crass father figure; "Oh, I don't know, DAD, why do you bother to protect Stolas here all the fucking time, always putting yourself in harms way?!"

This rebuke back left Blitz utterly speechless, completely lost on what to say in return! Contrary to the stiff, callous demeanor he had been letting on within the past two days, the imp knew that - one way or another - that his daughter was right. Nonetheless, Blitz was now beyond dumbfounded by his daughter's outburst over the matter, trying his hardest to find his words to little avail.

"Sweetheart, I-.. what-.. W-Why does this-..??"

Loona persisted, her snarling beginning to change to that of softer emotion, the hellhound's growling voice beginning to crack; "Please!! Please, let me have this! Let me prove to you all that I CAN handle responsibility; that I'm not just some useless, selfish, drunk, asshole hellhound! I Just-.. I-I just need you all to be on my side, even just this once! All I need is more time to figure out how to resolve this.. Please, Blitz, I need to.. just let me PROVE myself to you."

Blitz was left utterly dumbfounded by this incredibly unexpected plea, though his demeanor began to soften by barely a fraction. It hurt him to hear his own daughter practically beg for his support in this awful sequence of events, almost as if she was begging for his mercy, or what little there was.

It takes a few seconds for Blitz to deliver his response to Loona's desperate request, the imp knowing that whatever he says now would change the course of this most surreal dilemma, whether he liked it or not…

"… What do you think, Stolas? You reckon this is doable, especially with this human here?"

The owl ponders for a moment, considering all the options before delivering his deciding verdict; "Hm.. if what you say about this sinner is true, and he is just as dangerous as described, then… then yes, it will be my pleasure to have you all under my temporary protection."

A collective, welcomed wave of relief and reassurance rushed over the four attendees in the room with Stolas, though Jim was still somewhat hesitant in regards to his true intentions. Loona was perhaps the most relieved out of all of them, now that there was assurance that she now had much more borrowed time to figure out how to counter the looming threat that could strike at a moment's notice. In addition to the threat against Jim's life, Loona also felt that the safety of her colleagues, her father and now Vortex was another crucial addition to her growing list of priorities. There was no doubt within the hellhound's mind that there was a long fight ahead in her battle against the uniquely ferocious sinner now at large.

Stolas cleared his throat while covering his mouth politely; "Ahem- As I said; I wish I could stay longer, Blitzy, but I do have some business to tend to."

Blitz doesn't respond this time, this time only giving a slight nod to acknowledge the owl intent to depart. Once again, Stolas summons a portal back to his residence, just about to prepare to step through before hesitating, turning back towards the human behind him.

"Oh, and sir," Stolas addresses the human; "Do take good care of yourself."

"Hm. Thank you, I suppose," Jim expresses his gratitude, despite his deep reservations towards the new face.

The tall figure gives a final nod to the young man, before turning back around and strutting right through the portal, the summoned portal in question immediately closing as soon as Stolas had gone through completely. The party within the room had now been reduced to just four, not including Millie and Moxxie who were still isolating themselves after the intense encounter. While everyone present to listen to Stolas' assurances now had certainty that they'd be protected against

this new foe, mixed emotions still dominated their minds - especially Loona, who gave off a look of concern as she thought of the road ahead.

“I-I’ll be outside for a minute,” Loona announces, before heading out into the hallway, wanting the opportunity to have some time to think - alone.

Blitz was more than suspicious of the hellhound’s sudden announcement; “Now wait on just a second, young lady, where do you think you’re-”

“JUST- .. Just give me a moment, okay?? I need to think.”

Something about Loona’s demeanor and the way she carried herself made Blitz figure that it was best that he did good upon her request; the last thing he needed was more drama, especially in this particularly trying time. He watches on as the hellhound let out an exhausted exhale as she solemnly steps out into the hallway, before turning around and closing the door behind her.

Hopeless.

It was all so hopeless.

A million thoughts ran all at once through Loona’s head as she sat in solitude in the hallway, her back firmly pressed against the wall while effectively staring into space; none of these aforementioned thoughts were good. The reality of the near-grave danger associated with the sinner she so brazenly confronted had begun to settle within the very forefront of her mind, so much so that it quickly became the only thing she thought about. Loona was no stranger to risk; she had been in many situations which had been extremely dangerous for not only herself, but to those around her. This time, however… it felt all so different, so unique in its own sick and twisted way.

Millie, Moxxie, herself, and now Vortex - they had all been personally affected by Malloy’s relentless taunting, all because she had the conscience to save the life of a simple human. She thought deeply about this fact; the mental and physical anguish this entire ordeal had on them; Moxxie’s night terror, Millie’s furious anguish, her own traumatic past coming back to haunt her, and now.. and now Vortex’s injuries. They had all been hurt. They had all been hurt because of something out of their control.

They had been hurt… because of her.

This was her fault.

“No… n-no, it’s not my fault.. n-none of this is… right?”

Despite Loona’s best efforts to suppress the thought, it grew louder within her mind, the mental intrusion telling her over and over that the pain they had been through was all her fault; just another stupid, useless hellhound getting involved in things she had no business being in.

“I-I’m not.. No, I’m more than that!.. I-… I was just trying to-…trying to help.”

Loona tried and tried again to counter her self-deprecating guilt, muttering to herself over and over as the pressure grew within her mind. She felt so alone and hopeless, doubtful questions beginning to appear within her mind.

What if this was all for nothing?

What if someone got seriously hurt because of her?

What if this was hurting Jim more than it was helping him?

What if…

…

What if she fails?

“Shut up… shut up… *shut the fuck up*…!”

The lone hellhound began to breathe deeply, her breathing soon escalating to that of near hyperventilation, the whole pressure of it all getting to her head, stressing her out to the point of a borderline panic attack. “This must’ve been how Moxxie felt when his own panic attacks took hold of him,” Loona thought to herself; pure helplessness, a pandemonium of the mind racing at an uncontrollable rate!

Loona found herself bringing her knees up to her chest, practically curling up into a pitiful ball on the floor as she buried her head into her shaking hands, shutting her eyes tightly in a fruitless bid to block out the tormenting thoughts of self-doubt! She grips her fingers tightly against her head while baring her forcefully clenched teeth, desperately straining herself to suppress the panic attack about to take over her entire body! Hints of tears once again began to prick up in the sides of her eyes while a lump in her throat formed, almost too painful to bear!

It was getting all too much!

She wasn’t a failure!

She wouldn’t fail.

She wouldn’t fail!

She wouldn’t fa-

“Loona?”

Gasp!

As suddenly as her panic attack started, it stopped to the sound of a masculine voice! Loona practically jumps right out of her skin, almost immediately shooting her head up from her hands before looking to her right where the voice had come from! It was Vortex, his body still covered in

scratches and bruises from the ordeal, a staunch reminder of the capabilities of strength Malloy had.

“Tex? W-What are.. what are you doing out here?”

“Checking on you,” Vortex replies, looking down at the female hellhound pressed up against the wall; “Whatcha doing down there?”

Loona was at this point conflicted, hoping beyond hope that the fellow hellhound beside her hadn’t noticed her panicking just moments ago. She clears her throat before attempting to create an excuse out of thin air.

“Uhh.. j-just chilling out here, you know? I’m tired of sitting in that shitty office, it’s not good for me,” Loona goes on to “explain”, all the while trying to force a convincing parted smile.

Perhaps as expected, Vortex didn’t seem at all convinced; “Uh-huh, is that why I found you curled up into a ball while muttering to yourself?”

“Y-yeah, exactly!” Loona persists; “Don’t worry about me, I’m fine; I promise.”

“… No you’re not.”

This rebuke left her taken aback; “I’m.. sorry?”

“Don’t play dumb, L, you heard me,” Vortex bluntly stated; “Gotta say, you’re not very good at hiding your emotions around me, are you?”

A subtle blush formed on Loona’s face, the faint redness showing through her fur; “I.. A-Aren’t I?”

“Heh- Nope!” Vortex chuckles as he steps fully outside into the hallway, rubbing the back of his neck in a pained manner; “Agh- so yeah, tell me; what’s the matter?”

Loona looked upwards towards the fellow hellhound towering over her, giving off a look of curiosity as to what exactly was bothering her. Although Vortex meant well by the question, Loona was nonetheless hesitant to express her true feelings, the thought of being mocked for it still very much terrifying her. After a very brief moment of thoughtful stagnation, Loona timidly speaks up once more, trying to play it off.

“Look, Tex, it’s really nothing you need to worry about. It’s just me being stupid - I’ll get over it, okay?”

“Loona.”

“I-It’s just my mind fucking up, that’s all. Just let me gather my bearings, and I’ll be fine.”

“Hang on a minute, Loona, listen to-”

“I’ll be fine, I swear! Just gotta suck it up, a-and I’ll be fine-”

“Loona, stop!”

Vortex manages to snap Loona out of her stress-induced rant, the female hellhound immediately pausing to look back up towards him. She was stunned to see just how stern the wounded bodyguard looked, though his stern posture wasn’t that of scolding, but that of genuine concern for her mental well-being.

Maintaining his stern expression, Vortex began to speak; “Just hang on for a moment, listen to me; you’re not fine. It’s far too obvious you’re stressing out over this whole thing, you can’t hide it from me.”

This admittance from Vortex left Loona speechless, completely lost on what to say; It was blatantly obvious to her that any attempt to assure him that she was “fine” was utterly futile, and that there was no other way out of this than to just admit plainly that she felt that the sheer weight of the world was upon her shoulders.

The tall, bulky hellhound repositioned himself in front of Loona, slightly crouching down to get just above her eye-level; “You can tell me that you’re not okay, L, I assure you. Nobody here is going to berate you for admitting that. I’ll ask again, and tell me truthfully - are you okay?”

…

Loona shakes her head, her eyes flickering with a hint of growing worry unveiling itself through her tough exterior.

Vortex slowly nods his head, letting out a soft exhale through his nose; “What’s bothering you?”

“… I’m afraid, Tex.”

“About what?”

“… About failing,” Loona finally admits, having to force herself to spell the individual syllables out; “As in, what if I fail to protect you all from this fucked-up sinner who’s now after us? What if, because of me… what if he manages to kill one of us? He could manage to get any of us; Moxxie, Millie, Da- uh- Blitz, Jim… maybe even you. I’ll have to live with the fact that whoever dies, will be dead because.. b-because of me. Because I failed.”

…

“Tex, I’m… I’m scared.”

Vortex’s sympathies were fully with the pitiful Loona on the floor; never once before had he seen her in such a vulnerable and helpless state of mind, curled up into a small ball on the floor as if she was a scared puppy. After careful consideration with all the information he had, Vortex delivered his final judgment on the matter.

“I don’t think you’ll fail.”

The pitiful female hellhound's ears perked up in surprise at this admission; "You don't?"

Vortex merely shook his head gently as a definitive answer, giving off a warm, reassuring smile.

Although this gesture did spark some form of self-confidence within herself, Loona still had deep, self-doubting reservations; "B-But what if I do? What if I end up letting you down?"

The male hellhound let out a sympathetic sigh; "Loona, I… may I sit down next to you? You know, on the floor."

A deeper blush was quick to spread across Loona's face as she began to feel flustered by this most unexpected request. This didn't last long though as she managed to hastily regather her composure with success; "N-Next to me?? Of course! I-I mean, uh.. sure!"

A snicker managed to escape Vortex's lips as he proceeded to ease himself down onto the floor next to Loona, groaning in pain from his inflicted bruises which ached as he moved. "*Ngah!* Hah- That's better," he states, sitting down with his legs outstretched in front of him, his well-built stature still managing to tower over Loona, who looked towards him with weary eyes.

After making himself more comfortable, the bodyguard began to speak.

"You may not believe me, L - and to be fair, it's not like I admit this every day - but… I was in your position once."

Loona seemed almost perplexed by this admission; "How do you mean?"

Vortex let out a smirk; "Heh. You know exactly what I mean; nervous about the future, worrying about how I'd go in regards to handling my responsibilities, if I would fail in my work, et cetera, et cetera. I wasn't always the bodyguard that I am now, L; in fact, for a long time, I was near hopeless. It took a really long time for me to get to where I am today, having to practice fighting and training endlessly so I can perform my job to the best of my ability."

The male hellhound took a moment to quietly reflect on what he was about to say, before promptly continuing without much hesitation.

“That first year was the most mentally taxing, to be frank with you; literally the most painful experience I had to cope with. Verosika had literally come into my life out of the blue and I had to learn a lot on how to conduct myself, how to defend someone of that high of a social status, you know? And sometimes… The stress got to me so much that I would sit alone and - well, as embarrassing as it sounds - I’d sit alone and cry.”

“Sorry for interrupting, but.. I-I don’t think that’s embarrassing,” Loona quietly remarks, giving Vortex a light, almost comforting smile; “I don’t like admitting it either, but.. Sometimes I sit alone and cry, too.”

Vortex replied with a smile of his own; “Is that right?”

Loona let out a brief snicker, almost trying to cover her embarrassment for admitting it; “Heh- Yup! It’s a stress-reliever sometimes; I suppose it isn’t bad to have a moment to cry to yourself.”

“Truer words never spoken.” Vortex states, before continuing with his story; “Ahem- Anyway! So yeah. I liked to have some time to myself to let it all out more times than I’d like to admit, and I remember on one of those occasions where - embarrassing enough - the boss finally caught me. I tried to play it off, saying that “I was fine” and all that crap, but she isn’t one to be fooled. She managed to help me calm down, and decided to sit next to me on the floor; much like how we are at the moment, come to think of it. Up until that point, I never had someone be… that nice to me; to give me the time of day and listen to how I felt. My fears, my doubts; the boss listened to it all. You know what she said to me? She said; “Your greatest enemy is your own doubts, and the only way to win is to prove them wrong. The only way those self-doubts win is if you listen to them.” She also said something very comforting to me on that day, too; that she “Believed in me”. That’s what I’m relaying to you, Loona; I believe you can do this - you’ve got this.”

Loona was still somewhat apprehensive about the burden she had to carry, but these words managed to comfort her; “...You think so?”

Vortex gave off a comforting smile and a nod; “I know so.”

“Heh. I suppose you’re right. .. Thanks ‘Tex, I appreciate it - I really do,” Loona quietly expresses her gratitude.

“My pleasure,” the male hellhound snickers; “And hey; if you need help at any point through this mess, don’t be afraid to contact me, ‘kay? I’ve got as much a bone to pick with that *son-of-a-bitch* as you do!”

Loona couldn’t help but snort humorously at this remark; “Tss! That’s great to hear, I guess. Again, thank you so much. Good to know that you have my back on this one.”

Vortex merely gave a warm smile in return, knowing that no more needed to be said at that point in time. Indeed, the “battle” had been won for that first day, but the semi-metaphorical “war” was still yet to begin. The pair of hellhounds sat in silence for a moment, both of them staring into space with nothing else needed to be done or said. Out of mild boredom, Loona decided - for the first time in fifteen minutes - to check her phone, only to find that, to her surprise, that she had received five different missed texts from none other than Octavia over the span of ten minutes.

“Loona, what the fuck’s going on over there?”

“Why is dad coming to see you?”

“Loona?”

“Loona PLS answer me ur starting to worry me”

“What’s going on!!!”

Loona immediately winces at the missed texts; “Oh sh-! Sorry Tex, give me a minute. Gotta answer something.”

“Oh? Who is it,” Vortex asks, though not wanting to intrude too much in Loona’s personal business.

“Remember Octavia? Yeah, it’s her,” Loona answers; “Do you mind if you could go back inside so I can answer this? N-Not to sound rude! Just a private conversation.”

Vortex let out a brief, hearty chuckle; “Hah! Nah, don’t worry about it, you’re not being rude. I’ll go inside for you.”

The female hellhound expresses her gratitude through the form of a quiet “thank you” for the umpteenth time, watching on as the fellow ‘hound got up from the floor with a heave before immediately returning inside. This singular sitting alone was perhaps the only time in recent memory she had openly - let alone verbally - expressed her gratitude so often and repeatedly. As soon as Loona was sure that she had complete and utter privacy, she proceeded to dial Octavia’s number, pressing the ‘call’ button before holding it up to her ear. It takes a few seconds for the teenage owl to answer, the phone buzzing in Loona’s ear for a couple of turns until - at last - she sound of a familiar voice emanates from her device:

“Hello? Loona, is that you??”

“Yeah Via, it’s me! Sorry I couldn’t answer, we got some crazy shit going on over here I had to deal with.”

“I know. I heard from dad. What the fuck’s going on over there?! Something about a sinner?”

Loona inhaled through her teeth; “Yeeeah, something like that.”

“W-What does that even mean; ‘something like that’? Please Loona, just tell me! What is going on that’s so important, that dad has to come see Blitz over some “powerful” sinner??”

“... Okay, okay, I’ll tell you! Just, promise you won’t freak out, okay?”

“I already don’t like the sound of this, but okay…”

…

“He’s WHERE?!”

An Evening's Downtime

From within the private, solace sanctuary of the meeting room, Millie had at long last cooled down sufficiently from the instantaneous brawl that had occurred without warning, though the adrenaline of having to hear Chaz's name as a sinister taunt still remained, albeit in a much less intense form. Moxxie, who was usually the one in need of comfort, had taken upon himself the task of comforting his clearly distressed wife, doing everything within his knowledge and ability to assist her in getting into a clearer frame of mind. For the past ten minutes, he had been continuously providing Millie therapeutic shoulder rubs and constant wellbeing related small-talk to keep her distressed mind off the source of her trouble.

"That's it, hunny, you're doing great. Now, one more time," Moxxie instructs for the umpteenth time in a hushed tone of voice, continuing to rub Millie's shoulders firmly yet soothingly; "Breathe in…"

Millie does exactly what her most caring husband instructs, inhaling gently through her mouth while staring off into space.

Satisfied that his wife was following his instruction carefully, Moxxie continues; "Okay, hold. … And breathe out."

The female imp let out an elongated soft exhale, once more slouching her posture within the office chair in an encouraging sign that she was no longer as tense as she previously was. Moxxie persisted with his continuous, mentally therapeutic shoulder massages, glad to feel that perhaps his efforts to comfort his wife were paying off.

While maintaining physical contact with Millie's shoulder, Moxxie carefully circles around to face her directly, maintaining his soft, caring demeanor; "There we are. Any better, hun?"

Though she was still somewhat tense from the most unwelcome ordeal, Millie manages to weakly nod her head while trying to form a small smile; "Y-Yeah.. I'm better… T-Thank you, Mox'."

"Anything for you, sweetpea," Moxxie gently reassures as he pulls up an office chair for himself, making sure to keep hold of the female imp's shoulder while gently squeezing it with a firm yet caring hand.

After much persistent struggle against the foreboding tension generated by the sinner, the meeting room was now filled with the most comforting feeling of peace and steadfast sanctuary, away from the immediate and apparent threats of the outside world. This was the same reassuring feeling that would follow whenever the roles were reversed, as they usually were anyhow, with Millie coaxing her husband out of his episodic panic attacks; although they weren't as frequent as they once were not so long ago, they certainly were considerable whenever they did occur.

A stress-induced whimper left Millie's lips as she gazed in a disconcerted manner at Moxxie; "Wh-Who was that, Moxxie? How did… How the fuck does he know about Chaz?"

"That's what I'm trying to figure out," Moxxie concedes, equally as clueless about the sinner himself; "I think that human out there has some explaining to do."

A still somewhat disoriented Millie let out a grunt in "acknowledgment" to her husband's statement, though she wasn't exactly paying that much attention, only clearly hearing the words 'human' and 'explaining' before discarding the rest of the sentence. At least for the moment, all that she was concerned about was keeping herself from falling into an episode of savage ferocity once more.

A soft-spoken Moxxie clears his throat to get Millie's attention again; "You feel like going back outside yet?"

Millie appeared to think upon the question for a brief moment, perhaps considering all of her options before giving off a meek shake of the head; "Not yet, Mox'. I-I'll be fine if you want to go back out, though; I'll be out soon."

Quite understandably, Moxxie wasn't entirely convinced as of yet, far too hesitant to just leave her alone like that; "Are you sure, dear?"

For the first time since the confrontation, Millie gave off a soft, reassuring smile before providing her significant other - emphasis on significant - with her definitive answer on the matter; "I'm positive. Thanks for checkin'."

This expression of gratitude certainly wasn't lost on Moxxie, who began to smile warmly; "Of course, hunny. I couldn't possibly forgive myself if I didn't!"

“Aw, come on now! Don’t be so harsh on yourself,” Millie tries to reassure, though admittedly she did find the comment oddly endearing.

“What? All I’m saying is the truth,” Moxxie snickers, getting up from his chair before sneaking in a swift kiss; “I’ll be outside with the others. Shout out my name if you need anything, I won’t be far.”

With kind affirmations out of the way, Moxxie begrudgingly leaves his wife’s side to exit the meeting room, the intention to educate himself further on the matter of this “Malloy” through light interrogation of the human that was present stood in the forefront of his mind. Usually such a task wouldn’t be so pressing to the smartly-dressed imp who was almost always reserved on getting too involved; it was the manner that the aforementioned sinner mentally affected his beloved was what convinced Moxxie to take much more affirmative action. The meeting room door swung wider and more forcefully than Moxxie had intended, causing it to bounce off the wall with a blunt thudding sound, proving to be a source of sudden fright to Blitz, Vortex, and the accompanying human.

Blitz was clearly frustrated by the suddenly intrusive noise, on top of everything else; “Oh for- Careful with the fucking door, Moxxie! I just got new hinges!”

“Oh shit! A-Apologies sir,” Moxxie was quick to apologize as he briskly approached Jim who was cautiously observing the imp approaching him at an alarming rate; “As for you! Jack or Joe, whatever your damn name is, I don’t care, you’ve got some serious explaining to do!”

This demand wasn’t lost on Jim, though his annoyance was clear; “Oh for fuck sakes- What now? Can’t I catch a bloody break around here??”

Moxxie was in no mood for any form of negotiation; “Not until you explain what’s going on! This whole thing has gone and upset my wife in there, and I DEMAND answers! Now tell me; Who exactly is this guy, and how do you know him?”

Jim seemed almost incredulous towards this inquiry; “So you’re telling me that you’ve got no idea who Malloy is? Despite the fact that you had him on your hit-list for.. how long?”

“I don’t ask questions, I just do my job. Now speak!” Moxxie fervently demands, almost as if the human he was speaking to was a mere dog awaiting orders from its master.

The insulted young bushman scoffs right back in the imp's scowling face; "Huh! Maybe if you didn't speak to me like some mutt, I'd be more obliged to answer-"

"Why don't you answer the question?" A calmer masculine voice chimes in from the background, the source of which came from Vortex who had just returned back inside.

"Because I don't know!" Jim exclaims very emphatically; "I can give you all that I do know, but I don't know definitive answers, alright? That bastard's always been a secretive character, even when he was alive, and I personally don't know him from Arthur or Martha."

"Then tell us what you know! That's literally all I'm asking for," Moxxie elaborates in a much calmer tone, with cooler heads beginning to prevail once more.

Jim raises his eyebrow towards Moxxie; "Everything?"

The imp nods his head rigidly, quite obviously - and perhaps desperately - eager to learn more; "Everything."

"... Righto," a defeated Jim at last concedes, adjusting himself against the wall where he stood, folding his arms in a slightly defensive manner before beginning; "This is all that I know. His full name is Victor Ian Malloy. Nobody knows how old he truly is, but he was born around the mid-to-late nineteen-forties, so a rotten old bastard both literally and as a figure of speech. He was in Vietnam for three years and that's where most people back in town reckon he started going mental, though most just figure - including myself - that he's always just been sick in the head. There were rumors that he had committed some… not very nice things over there and he was nearly court-martialled for it."

Vortex momentarily interrupts Jim's train of thought; "So a war criminal?"

Jim considers this rather fair assumption, letting off a shrug of consideration; "I suppose you could call him that, yeah. But yeah, anyhow; He started getting involved in the criminal underworld when he returned to Australia in the mid-seventies. Got involved with some Union called the "Painters and Dockers" in Melbourne, started doing their dirty work for them. This included, but wasn't limited to, uh.. intimidation, attempted murder, drug smuggling, weapon smuggling; you name it, he fucken did it."

“So what? That’s just run-of-the-mill psychopath stuff, not like anything we haven’t seen before!” Blitz chimes in, perhaps forgetting the encounter that had resulted in a gaping shattered window and a wounded hellhound ten times Malloy’s own expected strength, at least by appearances sake.

Jim seems quite baffled by Blitz’s lack of proper judgment; “What? Mate, you literally just saw him manage to hold Vortex over here - a literal towering hunk of wolf - at gunpoint after having beaten him to a near pulp! Victor is far from “run-of-the-mill”, and even more so with whatever power he holds now.”

“He does have a point, sir,” Moxxie comments in all seriousness, rubbing his chin in deep thought.

A reserved Blitz stares blankly at the young man while trying to think of a question of his own, anything that could advance the conversation in a productive manner; “Riiiight. And what business does he have with you in the first place, Jim-boy?”

Jim threw his hands up in the air to emphasize his cluelessness; “Fuck if I know! As I said, I only know so much!”

“Well there’s obviously some sort of connection,” Blitz thinks aloud, trying to piece the information together with what little he had to work with; “We’ve got two possibilities here; either “A”, you unknowingly came across something that you shouldn’t have like a retard and now he’s out to violate you, or “B”, you’re lying to me like a pathetic, little pussy-ass bitch! I’m gonna go out on a limb here and say that the latter is the most likely scenario.”

“Excuse me? Based on what?!”

Blitz persisted with his accusing stance; “Probably based on the fact that your entire country is populated by a bunch of ex-convicts! Come on, you can’t hide it from me forever. Your family is THAT family; the missing links, social outcasts! Everyone from your mom, dad, you name it!”

“… Fucken what?”

Moxxie couldn't help but notice the anger growing within Jim's eyes, promptly turning towards his boss to warn him; "Uhh, sir? I-I really don't think you should be saying this.."

"Oh come on, Moxxie, he knows exactly what I'm talking about! You know the ones I mean; missing links hidden in plain sight. A bunch of inbred, backward hicks who smuggle drugs, weapons, and all that kinda good crap! How can't you see it? We've dealt with his type befo-"

THWACK!

"OW, FUCK!"

The beyond insulting monologue that Blitz was mouthing off was abruptly cut off by one of the water bottles he had bought back for Jim earlier, the projectile hitting him with brute force right in the face!

Blitz was left astounded, completely oblivious to the reason for this action against him as a searing pain flowed through his temple; "FFF- NGH! The fuck was that for?!"

Jim sneered angrily at the imp standing before him; "I'll write you a list, followed by a kick right in your schnauzer!"

Despite his frustration against Jim for what he saw as an "unprovoked" attack against himself, Blitz couldn't help but react accordingly to the bizarre bit of slang that he hadn't ever heard before in his life; "Ohh, I'm itching to tear you a new dickho-.. I'm sorry, in my what now?"

Right before Jim had the chance to explain whatever a "Schnauzer" was according to his homeland's slang, the front door swung wide open to reveal Loona with phone in hand, the lit-up screen revealing she was in a call with someone. The hellhound wasted no time at all to approach Jim who was still leant against the wall with his arms crossed, though his face had changed to that of curiosity. A gut instinct told him that in actuality that whoever was on the other end of the line was after him. The words spoken to him proved this to be much more than mere speculation.

"Someone wants to talk to you. Don't worry, it's a familiar face this time," Loona immediately explains as she holds out her phone towards Jim for him to answer.

A mentally and physically tired groan left the young man's mouth; "Oh bugger it, who now??"

"Hey, hey, don't stress out, it's just Via," Loona goes on to quickly reassure, her attention then being drawn away from Jim and towards Blitz who was rubbing his forehead in discomfort. This immediately piqued the female hellhound's curiosity; "The fuck happened to you?"

It was painfully obvious that not only did Blitz have a possibly bruised forehead, but as well as a bruised ego; "I'll tell you what happened! That feral piece of human SHIT next to you punted a bottle at my head! Tell him to control his fucking temper!"

The hellhound couldn't help but break out a toothy smirk at the display before her; "Eh, you probably deserved it. Maybe try keeping your mouth shut for a change, huh?"

Moxxie was next to voice his own respective dismay; "Now hold on, Loona, we're not done with him just yet!"

"Well I say that you are! So put up or shut up," Loona remarks back with her usual snarky wit, making sure to assert to the pair of argumentative imps that it was either her way or no way at all.

"Excuse me a minute," Jim requests as he went to find a more private place to answer the call, resorting to isolating himself outside in the hallway before finally holding Loona's phone up to his left ear; "Y-Yeah, hello?"

"No fucking way… This better be some kind of sick joke!"

The familiar feminine voice belonging to Octavia blared in his ear, with the teenager's disbelief in the situation most apparent to Jim, especially in the way she held her voice. A swift clearing of his own throat enables Jim to continue this most unexpected conversation.

"Yeah nah, um… sorry to say, but I'm afraid not," the young man promptly concedes; "I wish I could explain myself to ya, but uh…"

Octavia was quick to forward the conversation; “You don’t need to; Loona already explained it well enough. What the fuck happened? S-So you’re the reason dad went over?!”

“Ahh.. Y-Yeah, I suppose so,” Jim tries to explain himself all the while the awkwardness of the phone call settled in; “It was more about this crazed old arsewipe called “Malloy” who tried to hold us all at gunpoint- Wait, ‘your dad’? You mean to tell me that tall son-of-a-bitch that came in and gave me the biggest fucken fright in me life is your fucking DAD??”

“The tall, spindly looking guy with the funny accent? Yeeeeah, that’s dad,” the teenager on the other end confirms with a hint of amusement towards Jim’s bewildered reaction.

An almost instantaneous pit formed within Jim’s stomach; “Cor Blimey- okay! This is too fucked even for me! He’s a tall, eldritch-looking bastard, ain’t he? No offense by the way.”

“Don’t worry about it, little taken,” Octavia reassures, quickly realizing that the conversation was dangerously going off track; “Anyway, you still haven’t explained yourself! W-Why are you down here? You’re not dead, are you??”

“Nah, not yet at least! Surprisingly… Loona found me bleeding out at the nick of time, managed to bring me down here to save my life, from what I’ve been told by the horse’s mouth. I got shot, like, five times in the gut yesterday by a group of blokes in my own home. Still hurts like a bastard, come to think of it…”

Octavia’s own stomach wrenched in a sickly fashion upon hearing of the injuries inflicted upon Jim’s being; “O-Oh shit.. I’m sorry to hear, that’s fucking horrible. Wait, so, why would anyone want to kill you in the first place? D-Did they say??”

“I… I still can’t remember,” Jim ultimately concedes; “I’ve got… I’ve got some weird memory fog from it, as if my body’s trying its hardest to forget it. Pretty sure it’s a common phenomena when something like that happens; your mind completely discards it.”

“Are you sure you don’t have a concussion or something like that?”

“N-Nah, I don’t think so.” As if out of thin air, the young bushman began to feel that he should verbally express his dismay for this situation at hand; “Hey listen; I’m sorry if this is stressing you

out, you know? I can hear you're as anxious as I am about this… fucking mess."

"Look, it's fine. Don't worry about it, this isn't your fault," Octavia emphatically reassures, a calmer frame of mind beginning to set in all the while she took audible deep breaths in a bid to calm herself down; "It's not as if this is.. completely unworkable, I suppose? W-We just need to be careful, that's all."

"That's my plan at least," the human nervously chuckles, regathering his nerves through the form of clearing his throat; "Ahem!- Look, I better go. I don't think Loona would be too happy with me using her phone for so long."

A light snicker could be heard on the other end of the line; "Oh, I don't think you're wrong to call that. I'll let you go from here. Just be careful, okay? Don't fuck up."

"I'll try, Octavia. I'll try," Jim mutters apprehensively before deciding to end the call on that note.

A guttural sigh left his lips while he pressed his head against the wall, trying to figure out how much time he could possibly have until something more disastrous happened to him; that much was almost definitely for certain. The lone young bushman couldn't help but feel hopeless in this most bizarre situation, though the constant assurance from Loona did provide a much needed sense of security; how much help she could possibly provide in reality would only be told in the fullness of time. Jim let out a shuddering breath compelled by exhaustion before working up the courage to return back inside, noticing through the horizontal window viewing inside that Blitz was occupied with boarding up the shattered window that Malloy had so brazenly escaped through.

Right before the human could approach the door leading inside, it was swung open from the inside to reveal Vortex preparing to leave. It was also apparent to Jim that the towering hellhound before him had tended to his wounds while he was outside, with fresh bandages wrapped tightly around the worst of his injuries. A brief nod of Jim's head was received by Vortex to acknowledge his presence, the hellhound returning the exact same gesture as he began to stride his way across the hallway towards the doors marked with "V.M.".

"So you're going now, hey?" Jim decided to ask so as to strike up some form of neutral conversation.

Vortex let off a subtle nod as he paused outside the door on the opposite side, deciding to turn around to face the human; "Hm. I think so. Can't leave the boss waiting for too long, you know?"

“Too right, too right,” the human agrees with the passing comment; “You reckon she’ll find out what happened to ya? I mean, it’s pretty obvious you got bashed around.”

“Eh, I’ll come up with a cover story, don’t worry,” Vortex wryly chuckles in an attempt at dry humor. The taller hellhound clears his throat briefly before further contributing to the light conversation developing; “Hey, before I go - I know we barely know each other next to, uh… wait, how did you put it earlier?”

“What, Arthur or Martha?”

Vortex promptly clicks his fingers; “Yeah, that. Although that’s the case - I’ve just told Loona this and now I’ll tell you as kind of a favor - if that rotten old fucker comes back ‘round at any time, just say the word and I’ll be right over to beat his ass senseless.”

“Hah! Is that right, huh?”

“You bet!” The intimidating, well-built bodyguard affirms with a parted grin; “But yeah, Loona knows my number so she’ll probably call me in case she needs backup.”

Jim went along with information by nodding his head intently; “Ah true. So how do you two know each other, hey? Is there, like, some sort of… relationship?”

This notion managed to take Vortex by mild surprise; “A relationship? No, no, nothing like that. It’s more so she hangs out with myself and a group of others whenever there’s a party or something along those lines.”

“Ah yeah?”

“Pretty much. We’ve known her for a couple of years now. She’s usually sociable, but sometimes she tends to act all awkward, especially around me or anyone she finds her fancy that night.” The male hellhound lets out a light-hearted chuckle before continuing; “She thinks I don’t notice that she’s got a massive crush on me, but it’s.. heh. Well, it’s pretty obvious to say the least.”

“I mean, from a woman’s perspective mate, you would look impressive,” Jim comments in a lighthearted way as he leant his back against the wall with his hands nestled inside his trouser pockets.

A louder cackle lightly reverberates throughout the hallway as Vortex found the remark rather amusing; “HAH! Trust me, Jim, I do get that a lot! But as much as I appreciate the advancements, it’s hard for me to accept them. I mean, I already got a girl you know? Can’t go breaking her heart like that.”

The human, who was listening intently to Vortex’s intriguing information dump, raised his brow and nodded knowingly; “Ahhh- yeah, yeah, I getcha. It’s good that you’re loyal like that, mate, it really is.”

A slow nod in agreement with the sentiment came from Vortex as he thought on what to say next; “Hm! Oh for sure! But yeah, enough about me. What about you? You got a girl?”

This sudden question managed to catch Jim slightly off guard, not necessarily expecting to hear an inquiry which was this personal; “Me? Nah.. nah, not yet. I mean, like, at least I think I do, but I haven’t seen her in a while.”

“Oh yeah?” Vortex persistently inquired further as he wondered with mild intrigue where this was going to go; “Wanna tell me more about her? Spill the beans a little?”

“Might as well, seeming that we’re on the topic of women. Something pleasant for a change, huh?” Jim let out a gruff sigh before deciding to spill the proverbial beans; “I met her a few years back in town by pure accident; her name’s Lorraine. A little brunette who’s about yay-high, up to around my shoulder. I met her in the strangest way possible as well; sitting alone in a barren part of town for some time to myself. Sure enough, Lorraine said she came to do the same thing. Then we.. then we got to talking.”

To advance the conversation that bit further, Vortex asks an extension to his previous question; “So what’s she like?”

An increasingly softened smile spread across Jim’s lips, reminiscing in an almost melancholic sense; “Oh, let me tell ya. She’s tough and feisty, yet sweet - at least from what I can tell from the

half-dozen times we've met. She's got a passionate spark about her, whenever she used to talk about breeding and taking care of stallions and mares, or whenever she'd lecture me about archaeology which she studied for a period of time. She's just so… passionate. I haven't seen her in well over six months now though, so I don't know if she's moved on, or… yeah, it's just up in the air at the moment."

"… I'm sure you'll find her again, it's just a matter of time," Vortex tries to assure with a half-smile; "Reminds me of my girl, actually. We didn't meet instantly and agreed that we were a thing until WAY later. If you don't mind me saying; if she means that much to you, my advice is that you don't give up hope. It'll happen, it just needs to happen at the right time. You know what I mean?"

A quick moment of mental stagnation causes Jim to pause while thinking upon the rather simple advice given to him, though the human knew exactly what Vortex meant. He watched on as the hellhound before him unlocked the doors to Verosika's part of the hallway before entering inside to retrieve whatever was in need of collection. This allowed for Jim to be left alone for a short while, the only thing keeping him company was that unmistakable apartment building smell which could be associated with unwashed floors or old carpet which had seen many people walk over its surface over the decades. It didn't take long for this moment of solitude to be broken once more as Vortex emerged with a half-opened cardboard box in his hands, full of what appeared to be printed photographs of some variation. A more focused inspection revealed that the pages contained a rather suggestive photo of a bright-pink woman with horns - Jim came to the conclusion that this must be the "Verosika" which he had heard much about, albeit from different viewpoints with varying levels of respect about her.

"So that's that then? You're heading off?" Jim inquired as he stood upright in a better posture.

"Yup! That'll be me," Vortex announces after locking the doors behind him; "I'll see you around, if I do."

"No worries," the human farewells, watching on as the male hellhound makes his way towards the elevator in casual yet wide strides. Just before Jim decides to return inside he stops before attempting to catch Vortex's attention for one last time; "Oh hey, mate?"

Vortex abides by the attempt to catch his attention by turning around; "Yeah?"

"You reckon everything will be okay?"

"… In all honesty? Things are up in the air, but despite that, I think it will," Vortex reassures with another smile; "Just don't do anything I wouldn't do and play it safe; that's all you can do."

With his miniature bit of final advice over and done with, Vortex gave a nod of farewell to Jim before finally stepping into the confines of the elevator which was awaiting usage. A quick jab of the button to the bottom floor prompts the elevator doors to roll close with a metallic shuddering sound, leaving the human to his private solitude once more within the hallway. The lonesome ambience of silence was quick to assert its dominance once more as Jim stood alone within the hallway, aimlessly attempting to conjure within his thoughts a sense of direction; an idea of what exactly to do from here.

Hopefully - in the fullness of time - that question would be answered definitely soon enough.

Moxxie absolutely despised pressure, even more so if it involved making decisions for problems where there were no clear solutions for. Although security against the new threat was no longer an issue, the matter of figuring out how to balance out running the business while at the same time dealing with the question of Loona's "human pet" was still very much out in the open. While it had been clearly established that the matter of Jim would be entirely on Loona, having to figure out the logistics for accommodating for both objectives was a matter that Blitz felt he needed to handle.

A thoughtful Moxxie paced anxiously while trying his utmost hardest to think of a proper course of action, all the while trying his hardest to prevent himself from devolving into a miniature panic attack. Although it wasn't inherently Moxxie's decision to come up with a solution in this scenario, he had nonetheless begrudgingly taken it upon himself to think of one as Blitz still hadn't proposed anything as promised the day before. Despite his best efforts to create a plan within his mind, his efforts were ultimately fruitless, vocalizing his dismay of this fact through the means of a defeated sigh before turning his attention back towards Blitz.

"S-So what now, sir? Where do we go from here," The imp asks rather impatiently, his eyes locked on his boss who sat on the now vacant couch with one hand supporting his head.

"Maybe if you gave me some time to breathe and THINK, maybe I'd have a fucking plan already! Ever thought of that," Blitz callously replies, practically pleading for Moxxie to shut up for the moment.

Millie by this time had rejoined the rest of the IMP team, having since returned to a much calmer and collective frame of mind. As per usual, she was the one actually attempting to progress the situation in a more productive way; “Do you need us to give you any space? We can if you need some time to yourself.”

A stress-induced chuckle left Blitz’s mouth as he cocked his head up from his hands towards Millie; “Millie, I don’t need space, I just need time! TIME! Tee! Eye! Uh.. H-However the fuck you spell it! I just need someone to give me some time! I-Is that too much to ask?!”

Moxxie decided to contribute to Blitz’s desperate request, though it wasn’t too helpful to say the least; “Okay, but that’s the thing; how much more time do we actually have?? We probably don’t have much, despite Stolas’ help.”

“Oh, that’s really helpful, Moxxie! Really helpful, thank you so-so much!” Blitz openly berates Moxxie and his overtly unhelpful analysis, obviously not appreciating the considerably pessimistic observation.

As if by sheer luck a multitude of ideas at last began to emerge within his mind; “W-Wait, everyone shut the fuck up, I-I think I got one… Why don’t we fake our own deaths? DAMMIT, nevermind, that’d ruin business for good! … Uh… new identities. T-Thats it, we’ll get new identities! It’ll be a new start for all of us, away from all the dickholes and freaks of the outside world! We’ll become hermits in a-”

“Orrr, we could always - oh I don’t know - split into pairs and deal with it that way?” Loona finally decided to speak up from the sidelines with her more logical take on the dilemma at hand.

“… O-Or we could do that, yeah. Good thinking, sweetie,” Blitz decides to agree, completely discarding anything else he was about to blurt out like a loose cannon, though he was sure that it would’ve been a great proposal.

“Credit where it’s due, Loona! At least it’s something,” Millie appeared to congratulate the hellhound in a rare moment of cooperation with her coworker; “So then, who will be doing what, do you think? I mean, we already know who’s looking after that boy out there.”

Loona chose to blatantly ignore that last snarky comment for her own sanity’s sake, rightly keeping her mind focused on ‘who’ would be doing ‘what’ for the following day; “Uh.. Okay, so; both you

and Moxxie can go out on our contracts, while Blitz does… whatever he does, and I'll figure out how to sort this shit out with Jim. See, Blitz? It's not rocket science."

In what could be described as near impeccable timing, the entrance door swung open to reveal Jim who had decided to rejoin the group, having since waved Vortex off when he departed. All eyes immediately turned towards the human as he gazed at all of them with mild confusion.

"Well look who it is! The burden of the hour," Blitz decides to coldly remark once more to the obvious annoyance of his daughter; "What do you think?"

"About what? Help me out here, I've just come back."

"About our flawless plan which will finally get you off our collective backs! Seeming that you're stuck with us - let's hope only for the moment - we've decided to restructure. M&M over here will look after our contracts which our clients have kindly gifted to us and definitely haven't been scammed out of without the chance of refund, while Loonie-Tooney tries to find a way to get you out of this shit-basket of a mess you find yourself in! How's that sound?"

"… I mean, it's a plan. Why? Do you want my approval or something?"

"Your approval? HA! Of course not, I'm just doing you the odyssey of telling you!"

"Pretty sure the word is 'courtesy', sir," Moxxie was quick to correct his boss' frequent misuse of vocabulary.

Blitz rolled his eyes heavily as he swiftly dismissed his employee's effort to correct him; "Yeah yeah, big deal, Mox'," he states in wilful ignorance before clasping his hands together; "Anyway, guess we'll close this popsicle stand for today! Tomorrow's a new day with the same-old bullshit plus a bit extra. For now? I need my poison and some time to chill the fuck out."

"What, so we're leaving?" The human inquires once more in an attempt to get himself up to speed with everyone else.

“Yup!” Blitz was quick to answer all the while he strides his way back to the reception desk to pull out the bed sheet he had arrived in; “You know what that means, right?”

In all seriousness, Jim knew exactly what this meant; “Ohh, for fuck sakes- Alright, get it over with,” he begrudgingly capitulates with a grunt, preparing once more to dress up in a makeshift body bag.

The early hours of the evening were fast approaching when Blitz, Loona, and their “dead body” finally arrived back to their apartment, the hellhound tasked with carrying the body stepping through the door first before setting Jim back onto his feet, then removing the slightly blood-stained bed sheet which the human was wrapped in to his relief. While Jim winced at the sudden sting of the light of the apartment shining in his eyes, Blitz decided now was the time to head straight into the kitchen to fetch himself an entire bottle of ice-cold alcohol he had kept in the fridge. Without even a hint of hesitation, the exhausted imp grabs the half-open bottle of his aforementioned “poison” before slamming the fridge door shut and waltzing over to the couch. As soon as Blitz practically slammed into the cushioning, he immediately began chugging the contents of the glass container as if it was water.

“Does… does he always drink like that,” Jim proceeds to ask Loona, observing in awe as Blitz practically absorbs the contents within the frosty glass bottle.

“Eh, sometimes,” Loona answers in an indifferent manner; “Usually if he’s under stress, he’ll just sink himself into an entire bottle of beer. He drank a full bottle of Vodka once; I think you can guess how that turned out.”

This tidbit of information took the human slightly aback due to the absurdity of it; “Bloody ‘ell… that’s not healthy.”

“Hey! S-Shut up back there,” Blitz drunkenly slurs while letting out a terribly disgusting burp which even made Loona cringe; “I don’t judge you for your fucking hermit lifestyle. N-Now let me.. *hic!*.. drunk in peash..”

A light intervention was enacted by Loona as she approached her father slumped on the couch, smirking a little at the display before her; “Actually, I think Jim’s got a point, dad. Try laying off for a little bit, okay?”

A low mumbling emanated from Blitz as he tried to form a sentence while holding a light child-like pout on his lips. It was painfully obvious that Blitz was a massive lightweight when it came to alcohol, and that Loona was most definitely the glorified nursemaid when he was in such a state, as ironic as it appeared.

Jim carefully approached the couch from behind, trying to catch a glimpse of Blitz's whereabouts; "Is.. Is he drunk already?"

"Oh no, he's just fine. Perfectly sober," Loona sarcastically replies, huffing as she rounded to the front of the couch before then crouching down to Blitz's eye-level; "You good there?"

The only response that Blitz could muster was a groan as he held his head; "Nnngh.. my fuckin' head hurts.."

Loona let out a gentle sigh; "You're just stressed. Relax, okay? … Wanna watch a movie?"

It appeared as though this suggestion managed to catch the moderately intoxicated Blitz's curiosity; "A- *hic!* A m-movie..?"

"You know, something to watch until you're over being shitfaced," the hellhound turned caretaker explains, her tone softened to accommodate for his apparent alcohol-induced headache; "You wanna watch 'Spirit'?"

A drunken twinkle lit up in Blitz's groggy eyes, his face lighting up with childlike excitement; "Spirit?? Oh fuck yeah!! P- *hic!* Pleeeeease??"

"Alright, alright! Easy there, dad, chill the fuck out," Loona replies to Blitz's sudden burst of enthusiasm as a small smile of slight endearment appeared on her muzzle.

After managing to coax her intoxicated father into calming down from his excitement with success, Loona obliges to his pleading by grabbing a DVD from the Entertainment Unit the flat-screen TV rested upon. She then proceeded to slot the CD into the DVD Player, the action of which seemed to automatically turn both it and the TV on. It took a moment for the movie to begin playing, but

when it finally started, Blitz began hyper-fixating on the screen as if his life depended on it, a drunken smile painted on his lips while he watched intently.

Loona let out a patient sigh as she stood back up; “I’ll be in my room if you need anything. Call out if you need me, okay?”

The imp gave off an unfocused nod as a reply, his eyes practically glued to the TV screen with a deep fascination with the film that was playing. Convinced that he had listened to her, Loona retrieved the still-cold empty bottle which Blitz had devoured moments prior, heading over to the kitchen to throw it in a small dustbin located behind the doorway.

While Loona tasked herself - albeit begrudgingly - to nannying, the bystanding bushman looked on in mild fascination; “Huh… talk about being a ‘nursemaid’,” he quietly comments to the hellhound who had re-emerged from the kitchen, careful not to disturb the imp engrossed in his binge watching.

“You don’t know the half of it,” Loona sighs as she shook her head; “If I wasn’t here to look after him? This place would be a disaster. Sometimes he’s a disaster himself.”

“No shit…” Jim quietly acknowledges, watching the film play on the TV with the volume turned down; “I-I’m just surprised, I guess.”

“About what? That I look after him?” Loona asks with a small grin.

“.. I mean, yeah I suppose,” Jim finally admits with a shrug of his shoulders.

A light snicker left Loona’s mouth as she gently shook her head; “I get it. Sometimes I surprise myself with how much I do for him. Speaking of being a slave, what about your shirt?”

“What about it?”

“You want me to throw it in the washing machine for you? I mean, it’s still covered in your blood, like come on - gross.”

Although the proposition was much appreciated, Jim couldn't help but begin hesitating, not wanting to bother Loona any further with doing others' work for them; "Nah, it's okay Loona, it's all good. I-I don't want to make you do my…"

His thoughts were stopped dead in their tracks when he noticed the hellhound glaring at him with a raised eyebrow, displaying a look that commanded respect for her decision to be generous. It wasn't as if she was proposing to do it anymore; that look was demanding, albeit in a well-meaning kind of way.

In order to avoid any potential repercussions, the previously reluctant human promptly unbuttoned his blood-stained shirt and completely took it off, rolling it into a ball before handing it to Loona. "Here, knock yourself out. Thanks anyhow."

The hellhound let off a smirk before she made her way over to the washing machine; "Don't mention it. Just try to stop resisting and accept my help, yeah? Doesn't do you any good."

"Yeah, you're right," the human conceded in a defeated manner, bowing his head down towards the ground in a similar manner a child being caught would.

An electrical beeping could be heard as Loona adjusted the settings on the washing machine located within the kitchen. The hellhound's voice could be heard calling out to order him a direction once more; "Go wait in my room, I'll be there in a minute."

In direct contrast to the previous orders, a now shirtless Jim unhesitatingly decided to abide by this direction to avoid any more potential "trouble" and stern-eyed scolding by his de-facto caretaker. Out of an abundance of caution in order not to snap Blitz out of his fixation to the TV, Jim cracks open the door slowly, opening it just enough so he could slip in before doing so, proceeding to close the door behind him with care as soon as he was in. Comfort arrived with the sudden silence which filled Loona's bedroom with the sound of the TV outside quickly muffled, gifting Jim with a moment to himself; to finally breathe and regather his thoughts. With a flick of the light switch, the singular ceiling light manages to illuminate the hellhound's room for the umpteenth time, revealing Loona's bed, her posters hanging on the wall, her nightstand and all other miscellaneous personal belongings of hers which were briefly hidden in the darkness.

A guttural sigh of mild exhaustion left Jim's lips as he sat down atop Loona's bed, running his fingers through his dark brown hair to relax himself in this moment of downtime. He once again

kicks off his rich-brown boots, haphazardly yet neatly storing them aside so that they would be out of the way in case Loona had to walk through. A slight wrenching pain in his gut confirmed to Jim that hunter was beginning to take priority in his mind, having not properly eaten within the past twenty-four hours; the anxieties and stresses of the situation he unwillingly found himself in had canceled out any other natural body needs, considering that survival had been first and foremost.

His focus on being hungry was momentarily interrupted when the door opened with a creak, revealing that Loona had just arrived, dressed in a fresh set of pajamas.

She acknowledges Jim sitting by the foot of her bed, her narrowed slightly to a soft confused squint; “The fuck you doing on there?”

Loona’s comment wasn’t lost on Jim as he suddenly began to lift himself off the bed, only to be stopped by the bed’s owner who found his almost visceral reaction oddly amusing.

“Hey hey- Dude, I’m joking! Chill out a minute, holy shit,” Loona was quick to reassure, a chuckling smirk spread widely across her muzzle.

“Sometimes I can’t tell with you! You scare the shit outta me,” Jim was quick to quip right back, heartily cackling along with Loona’s light-hearted teasing.

A laugh began emanating from Loona in amusement at this admission; “I’ll take that as a compliment, thank you! Real talk for a minute, though, are you good?”

“Uh.. Yeah nah, I’m okay. Getting hungry, though,” the human musters up the courage to admit while shyly rubbing the back of his neck.

Loona shrugs in response as she leant against the wall adjacent to her; “Okay, so uh.. what did you feel like?”

Hesitation began to accompany Jim’s thoughts at the notion that he may have to consume something of hellish origin, that earlier reservation with regards to the question of water once more returning; “Look, Loona; I-I’m deeply sorry for being picky again, but I’m really not comfortable with eating anything-”

“‘From down here’? Yeah, I know,” Loona proceeds to interrupt as she makes her way across the room towards a drawn knee-high curtain nestled between her desk and the far-left corner of the room; “Had a feeling you were going to say that. Please don’t tell dad about this, but you’re in luck.”

The small, knee-high curtain was promptly drawn back to reveal an off-white miniature fridge which was no larger in size and shape than Loona’s nightstand. A pull of the fridge door itself revealed the plentiful contents which were stored inside awaiting for consumption, an obvious secret stash that the hellhound most likely kept for herself and hidden well away from her father’s knowledge. To his curiosity, there was a strange familiarity about the contents stored inside, as if he had seen similar types before; almost as if these contents didn’t originate from their current location. It was when he noticed a label on a bottle titled “Jack Daniels” did he realize as to why they felt that way.

“Oh shit, sweet as! W-Where did you find all this,” Jim inquired all the while he eyed the contents which were now obviously earthly in origin, also noticing another familiar label which read “Heinz”.

“That’s for me to know and for you to guess,” Loona smirks; “But yeah, I’ve been going regularly back and forth from the living world to get some grub for myself. Like a shopping trip, but some of it is stolen.”

“Some of it?”

“Hey, sometimes I buy them! I’m not always a complete asshole,” the hellhound let out a smirk, grabbing one of the containers from the fridge; a can of braised steak and onion; “Care for some of this grub, or do you wanna starve?”

Starvation took the better of Jim as he desperately gestured for Loona to give him the entire aluminum can. Whether it was because of his nonverbal request or out of a sense of pity, it didn’t necessarily matter as Loona decided to not only open the can for him, but as well as provide a disposable plastic fork that was also stored - oddly enough - within the same fridge. Jim took a few seconds to check if the can was definitely of Earthly origin, managing to find the “Made in Ontario” logo before devouring his meal almost desperately, though being careful not to make a mess of himself. Meanwhile, Loona had grabbed herself that same bottle of ice-cold Jack Daniels and two glasses which appeared to have come with the strong-scented liquor, before heading over to her bed to sit right foremost relative to her effectively starving companion. Common courtesy

was applied when Loona decided to fill both glasses with the dark-brown liquid before gently handing one of them to Jim, who expressed his gratitude without hesitancy.

Jim took a break from eating to ask Loona a question, taking a second to clear his throat; “So.. ahem!- What made you start collecting our food, hey?”

Loona decided to shrug towards this fair inquiry; “No reason, I just like the taste of some of it, especially the canned shit. I won’t lie, I’m absolutely weak for beef. There’s just something so great about it, makes me melt all the fucking time. Plus, food down here can be mediocre at best and pure sewage at worst - think of it like biting into a piece of ass.”

“Right.. Is it that bad?”

“Trust me; it’s *THAT* awful.”

“Yuck…”

…

“Oh hey, Jim. You know how to play Poker?”

Although it was an out-of-the-blue question, it certainly wasn’t lost on Jim, who nodded while taking a sip of his glass; “Aagh- I’ve tried it once or twice at the Coachman’s Hotel in town, only put like five dollars in and lost both times. I dunno, I’m not a gambling man.”

An opportunity to scoff was taken by Loona, although it was only lighthearted; “Wow. That’s very boring of you.”

Jim scoffed right back with a shrug; “What? I like keeping my cash! I’m not letting some drunken prick at a table practically steal it from me.”

Loona let out a snickering chuckle as she shook her head, taking a sip from her own glass; “You up for a round of it, though? No stakes about it, either; just a pair of dorks playing cards.”

“... Argh- fuck it, why not?”

A wide smile spread across Loona’s muzzle as she pulled out a full deck of playing cards from the top draw of her nightstand. In addition, they also appeared to be “living world” in its origin, the ‘King’ card clearly visible on top of the stack within Loona’s hands. She rotated herself so that she was now sitting with her legs crossed atop the bedsheets, making herself comfortable while setting up the game. It didn’t take long for Loona to finish setting up as she took another sip of her drink.

She looks up from the cards while swallowing her liquor; “You gonna start?”

“Might as well,” Jim concedes, eating another mouthful of his can of braised steak and onion before throwing in two chips; “There we are, your call.”

The hellhound began to smirk before throwing in six chips of her own; “Hmph. Playing it safe, huh?”

“Oh, you know - just a force of habit, I suppose,” Jim admits with a smirk, watching as Loona revealed the first card in the five-card deck; a Jack.

“Oh my- come on, you old man!” The hellhound coaxes with a lightly mocking grin; “Why don’t you live a little? Go all in!”

“Alright, alright, I’ll wager a bit more! Jeez- You’re pushy, aren’t you?” The opposing human proceeds to throw in an extra half-a-dozen chips into the proverbial “pot”, which would accumulate to about five dollars if this were to be a serious game.

A light titter escapes Loona’s lips, revealing to the pair of them the next card; 8 spades. Both her own and the young bushman’s face appeared dimmer as they both realized in almost complete unison that there may not be a winner this round - a draw, in other words. Both players decided that for this round, they would both pass and conserve their respective chips which had quickly depleted.

The deep momentary concentration between the two players towards the results of the game was broken when Jim decided to speak up. “You wanna know something?”

Loona took another sip of her glass as she glanced up at her opponent; “Yeah, what?”

It appeared to Loona that her companion hesitated for a second, thinking on what to say, before finally stating his observation; “I’ve noticed something, whenever we talk. I’m always here talking about myself and my life, but I never hear you talk about yourself and your life. Why is that, if you don’t mind me asking?”

All that Loona mustered up as an initial response was a clueless and hesitant shrug. She stutters a moment before finding her words, carefully considering the subject matter; “Ehh... Meh, I dunno. I mean, what’s so interesting about me? I’m just a hellhound tryna get through life, that’s all.”

It was apparent to Loona that this answer of hers didn’t satisfy Jim’s persistent curiosity; “Oi, don’t degrade yourself like that - I’m sure you’ve got something to brag about. You’re a rock music type of person, you like peace and quiet, you’re a bit of a recluse - which isn’t inherently a bad thing, to be frank.”

Loona appeared to be mildly taken aback by the third and last observation; “Woah, hold on a minute - who said I’m a recluse? What are you tryna say, that I’m not a *‘people person’*?”

Jim raises his hand to correct himself, trying to defend his position and simultaneously avoid any offense; “Oh no, I didn’t mean it like that! I mean, like, I wanna learn more about you. We’ve been mates for a fair bit and I’d like to know you a little bit more, you know - as in, what you like doing.”

Now Loona had become less taken aback and more mildly perplexed - nobody had asked her something so… genuine before. In fact, she was so foreign to the concept of talking about herself that a clue as to what interests she had didn’t immediately come to mind. Although it wasn’t immediate, Loona did eventually muster the motivation to talk about herself.

With her brow furrowed for a moment in thought, Loona began speaking; “Oh shit, you got me on this one - uhh… I suppose I like… look, I know this sounds dorky as fuck, but… I have a small soft spot for space - in the living world, I mean.”

A slow nod of the head signaled to Loona that, to her surprise, Jim was apparently invested in this revelation; “Huh… is that right?”

Despite her continued reservations about speaking about herself, Loona nonetheless persisted; “Y-Yeah, I guess? I mean, come on - how can you not look up into the stars and just get lost with just how many there are. It’s trippy to look at, but it’s just so… beautiful. You know what I mean?”

Sure enough, a knowing smile spread across the young man’s face while Loona revealed the third card out of five; four Spades. He nods in complete understanding; “Yeah, Streuth. I know what you’re saying. I mean- I shoulda known you were into space, with your name and such. Hey look, once this whole… shit is over, you’re more than welcome to come up and have a gander one night.”

“Uh-huh, I’ll keep that in mind. I’d probably still have invited myself, even if you said no,” Loona replies with a rousing smirk. This same smirk quickly faded however as the hellhound begins to realize that her hand may not win to her moderate dismay; “Okay, this is some bullshit! You better not be winning over there, Jim, ‘cause I will kick your ass if you are.”

To see Loona receiving almost instant karma for her overconfident smirking provided Jim with a feeling of growing schadenfreude, looking down at his own five cards. It seemed that it was Jim’s turn for karma to strike, realizing that his hand wasn’t that much better either - perhaps even more abysmal than his opponent’s.

“Yeeeah, safe to say I’m shit outta luck as well,” Jim finally conceded, lazily throwing his cards onto the covers in front of him.

A wide, almost provocative smirk spread across Loona’s muzzle upon hearing this capitulation; “Jeez, you weren’t kidding - Guess you really aren’t a gambling man.”

Jim’s eyes peered up towards the hellhound in front of him, his head still positioned towards the sprawled out cards; “Loona?”

The hellhound immediately responds without a second's delay; “Yeah?”

After a couple of seconds of glaring up at Loona, a parted grin crept over Jim's lips as he wryly chuckled; "Geez, you're an arsehole."

Upon hearing this, Loona's already wide and teasing smirk grew ever wider; "Tch- Tell me something I don't know."

Slowly but surely, the night marched sluggishly on with half-a-dozen slow mock Poker games being played over and over until better results emerged. By the time the seventh round had begun, Loona had managed to win five out of the six rounds which served to bolster her bragging attitude even further. Jim, unfortunately enough, only managed to win one - these repetitive losses did make him wonder if he truly was, as he put it himself, "Shit-Outta-Luck". By this time, Loona had grabbed herself her own can of Braised Steak and Onion from her secret stash, proceeding to chow it down to Jim's awe of her daunting lack of table manners. Despite all the teasing, mocking, and banter between the pair of them, they both managed to find avid enjoyment in each other's company.

This experience was especially surprising to the owner of the room in question, Loona; Never in her right mind would she ever even contemplate allowing anyone into her private abode, yet here she was sharing it with a simple human no less. Despite all the worries that Loona may have had earlier within the day, this moment of pleasant downtime served her well, allowing for the hellhound to finally de-stress - with the aid of a bottle of her strongest serving of 'Jack Daniels' and dry mocking humor, of course. What pleased Loona further was the opportunity she was given to rant about what she loved most about her secret hobby of stargazing; the feeling of sitting alone while gazing up at countless upon countless stars and galaxies is what brought the hellhound an odd sense of peace, expressing this very emphatically to her listener with great enthusiasm.

Soon enough, a feeling of growing drowsiness began to overcome both Loona and her tenant, the hellhound deciding to pack everything away and storing them in their respective places, stowing away the rubbish in a dustbin on the corner of her room. Loona decides that it was best to do a final inspection of the entire apartment before bed, effectively tasking herself with housekeeping once again. As soon as she exits her room, she finds Blitz fast asleep upon the couch, the movie that was playing for him long since ended. Out of an abundance of care, Loona decided to gently throw a blanket onto her father - a gesture which very few people got to see, especially her coworkers; the hellhound begrudgingly thought about the absolute hell both Millie and Moxxie would give her if she was ever caught letting her guard down like that, a light sneer forming on her face.

It didn't take long for Loona to wander around that apartment of hers that she called home, making sure to hang out Jim's now clean shirt to dry over the washing machine itself in case she forgot. As soon as this final task for the evening was over and done with, Loona let out a long winded and obnoxious yawn with her teeth bared for all to see, before finally heading straight to her room to rejoin her tenant for that rather come evening.

Tomorrow was another day, after all.

Sleuth-Hound

Loona's eyes fluttered sluggishly open to an incredibly unexpected sight - the interior of a small old-fashioned office. The sudden realization that she was in an unfamiliar location caused the hellhound to jolt out of her drowsiness in pure shock, her eyes shooting wide open! A foreboding pit in the hellhound's stomach began to form as she attempted to focus her eyesight, subconsciously expecting to feel some form of restraints around her hands and feet, yet… yet there wasn't. Loona was quick to discover that she sat rather comfortably in a pristinely kept vintage office chair facing a finely-polished teak desk, another old-fashioned green leather office chair positioned directly on the opposite side.

After a brief moment to gather her bearings, Loona decides to slowly get up from her seat, feeling as the leather of the vintage chair peeled off of her fur as she got up. She slowly turns around to observe her immediate surroundings, examining everything with a deeply confused fascination. The hellhound's earlier immediate assumption that this unfamiliar place was, indeed, an old-fashioned office turned out to be true, finding mild interest in the dark rich-brown hardwood walls which were decorated generously with large Victorian-esque wall panels. The entrance door to the left was made of the same mesmerizing expensive rich-brown timber, patterned much in the same way as the walls surrounding Loona. A broad, towering varnished timber bookcase was positioned to the hellhound's immediate right, filled top-to-bottom with books and other assorted documents of sizes and shapes of dubious age. To the right-hand side of the entrance door was a long dark-green leather lounge chair in remarkably pristine condition. Above it was a rather impressive painting of rolling green hills, dotted with picturesque trees and scattered stone village buildings in the background of various sizes and shapes, perhaps depicting a valley settlement somewhere in what Loona believed was a region in the Living World called "Europe". A richly golden chandelier hung directly above her, the yellowish-orange tinted bulbs giving off a hue which lit up her immediate surroundings, assisted by a pair of vertical windows draped in parted, impressive maroon curtains which was casting a comforting warm light through the glass.

Loona pivoted back around to face the varnished teak desk before her, realizing that a final especially intriguing article hung up on the wall behind the chair on the opposite side; it appeared to be a flag made of cotton, and one which Loona hadn't ever seen before. It was filled with blue and white diamond-shaped patterns with a peculiar crest in the center of the rectangular display neatly hung high up on the wall. Just as the hellhound took a closer look at the smaller details, the sound of the door being opened startles Loona out of her concentration, making her swiftly turn back around to face the entrance door.

The hellhound stood awkwardly upright as she stared at the new arrival standing in front of the now closed door; an aging man - perhaps in his early 70s - dressed in a rather interesting combination of clothing. He wore a long black coat which stretched down to his knees, unbuttoned to reveal that he was wearing a dark-gray vest and a white undershirt. His long black trousers were tucked neatly just above a pair of laced black dress shoes, complete with a pair of white spats. Upon his head sat a gray Homburg hat with a thick black band, which was just as pristine in appearance as the rest of

the room Loona currently resided in. Completing this old-fashioned attire upon the old man's aging face was a neatly-kept whitish-gray beard, his remarkable kind blue eyes examining the hellhound before him.

In what was perhaps a force of habit and a slip of the tongue, Loona was the first to speak; "W-Who the fuck are you?"

This vulgar choice of words didn't seem to phase the elderly gentleman too much, taking his chance to speak next with his heavy posh German accent; "I would kindly request if you could refrain from using such language around me."

Despite it being a considerably kind request, Loona wasn't one to be ordered around, raising her eyebrow in a suspicious way; "Uh-huh, and what if I don't? What are you gonna do about it?"

The elderly man merely gave off a smile from under his well-kept beard to Loona's continued confusion; "I cannot do much, I figure," he admits, proceeding to take off his hat before holding it loosely in one hand; "Before I begin with our meeting, I would like to make it clear that you are dreaming - asleep. Despite that, though, be assured that I am most certainly real - this isn't your imagination."

Loona let off a tempered sigh, signaling her impatience; "Okay, that's cool - but you still haven't answered my question. I'll ask again; who are you?"

To the hellhound's further annoyance, the anonymous elderly gentleman before her didn't immediately respond, merely continuing to stand still in front of the vintage teak door with his hat resting by his side in one hand. There is a continued pause of silence until the man spoke once more; "Would it be absolutely necessary for you to know such a minuscule detail?"

"Well I'm not going to exactly trust a stranger who refuses to tell me his name, now am I?" Loona asks her rhetorical question, folding her arms as she did so; It was blatantly obvious to the elderly figure before her that she wasn't going to budge.

It appeared to Loona that her insistent stubbornness had paid off, noticing as the apparent owner of this luxurious study room appeared to consider a different approach away from his dubious identity. This was ultimately confirmed to be factual as he began to speak once more; "If it is most important that you know of my identity, then I shall grant it. My Christian name is Gunther. I have decided ultimately to assist you in the predicament that you find yourself in."

Loona couldn't help but tilt her head slightly away from the elderly gentleman, obviously still suspicious of his intention; "Riiight. You know, actually, I don't think I need your help, thank you very much - I can handle this on my own."

"Do forgive me for my verdict, Ms. Loona, but I'm afraid your confidence is too overzealous," Gunther bluntly replies, though he maintains his aged, soft-spoken, and croaky voice as he speaks.

The hellhound couldn't help but furrow her brow in utter disbelief, unbelieving that this mere old man had just refuted her own confidence; "Excuse me? I'm sorry, who the fuck are YOU to tell ME what I am capable of doing? I will say it again, you old fart, and you better listen - I am MORE than capable of handling responsi-... wait… h-how do you know my name?"

A soft knowing smile emerged from behind Gunther's extensively gray beard, his eyes darting momentarily between the ground and towards Loona before answering once more, revealing much more about himself; "I sincerely hope that you personally do not interpret this the wrong way, but I have been observing your case infrequently since the third day after young James Steele saved your life. The manner in which you seemed to have befriended this mere living man has deeply intrigued me, but rest assured that - in this case unlike others - I shall not interfere with the camaraderie that you two share; that is not what I'm here for, instead I am here to assist you through what I am certain will be… a psychologically taxing task."

This last portion of Gunther's introduction of his apparently true intentions wasn't lost on Loona, the wording of which somewhat unsettled her, especially with how serious the elderly German man appeared to be; "What do you mean?"

Sure enough, a weary look within Gunther's eyes appeared to form; "I am afraid that Victor Malloy is no mere man, Ms. Loona. He has vended his very own soul to forces which are most dubious and foreboding in nature before mortality caught up with him, forces which I am most familiar with - which is partially the reason as to why I have decided to take it upon myself to assist you within the boundaries of my own limited ability."

The way that Gunther carried his voice when talking in regards to the matter at hand made Loona realize that perhaps his offer to support her against Malloy in some form was genuine. She watched as the elderly man slowly waltzed his way past her and behind his desk, pulling out the green leather chair for himself before gesturing for his hellhound visitor to sit down in her own respective chair. Ultimately, Loona decided to take him up on this gentlemanly offer, sitting down in near unison with this mysterious aged man.

Loona takes the brief silence as an opportunity to ask a question; “What do you mean you’ve been ‘observing me’? As in stalking me? I dunno about you, but that sounds fu- I mean… that sounds really creepy.”

Gunther rested his clasped hands formally together atop the varnished teak desk, keeping a calm and collective formal demeanor as he replies; “Not necessarily stalking or observing in the literal sense - I assure you that I mean no ill intention. When I mean observing, I mean I’ve been studying your case from what I have been formally told by forces above me. They are as perplexed about your genuine well-meaning, unfeigned friendship with young James Steele as I am. In fact, neither I nor the forces above me have ever seen something quite like it before from your kind. So do tell me if you will, for I am genuinely curious; why is it that your friendship is most sincere towards young James, without ulterior motives? What coaxed you to make that decision to befriend him, and then to save his life?”

This most invasive question caused Loona to squint in growing suspicion once more. She was about to say something witty or vitriolic before stopping herself, subconsciously understanding that she didn’t need to act in such a way towards the inquirer. Instead, Loona decided to answer sincerely.

“You know how many times I’ve been asked that, by my own dad? By my coworkers? It’s tiring to keep repeating myself,” Loona admits in all seriousness before continuing; “But if it’s important that you know, then I’ll tell you. In all honesty, I really don’t know. I-I guess I just felt that… he didn’t deserve to die in such a shitty way. I had to help him. Especially after… especially after everything he did for me. All the effort he put in to deal with my crap for that week when I was a complete stranger to him? I hadn’t had anyone other than Dad do that for me - accommodate me in that way.”

In all consideration, this explanation appeared to interest Gunther even further; “So you feel empathetic? Perhaps gratefulness?”

Loona stammers a little before responding; “I-I’m really not that great with words, but… yeah. Yeah, I do.”

“I understand,” Gunther carefully acknowledges as he gently bounced his clasp hands against the varnished-team surface in thought; “Yet, you’ve butchered and maimed his kind before?”

This analysis seemed to agitate Loona slightly; “Yeah, I know I have! But Jim? He’s different to me. I’m not sure what it is, but the thing is that I actually do see him as… a-as a genuine friend. There’s no catch to it either, that’s just how I feel, and I don’t think I owe anyone an explanation about it.”

Gunther’s grayed, bushy eyebrows raised in pure fascination, expressing his opinion of such information verbally; “Peculiar. That is very peculiar indeed. Forgive me for saying such, Ms. Loona, but in my honest opinion there is something most unique about you. It seems to me that you possess a genuine sense of empathy, righteousness, and compassion in a way that even you didn’t know you had, despite the nature of your environment. Indeed, you are much unlike a considerable amount of cases which I have observed. This is why I wish to help you to the utmost of my ability; not only for your sake, but for young Steele’s.”

A feeling of solemnity rushed over Loona, knowing that Gunther’s evaluation of herself was most definitely true. She observes the elderly man as he promptly gets up from his vintage office chair, before then proceeding to begin making his way back towards the entrance door.

Before the elderly man hobbled his way towards the door, he instructed Loona with a request; “Do come with me, I must show you something which shall assist you in finding the answer you seek. Follow me with haste, for I do not have much time before you awaken.”

Loona felt compelled to abide by Gunther’s request, proceeding to get up once more from her seat before joining up with the smartly-dressed gentleman awaiting by the door. The hellhound watches as Gunther opens the vintage door, revealing a vast wilderness of countless trees, the sunlight shining in between the intertwined network of leave-covered branches instead of an expected adjoining hallway with the same prestige as the study room, to Loona’s mildly baffled perplexion. The guide waves her forwards as he steps through the doorway, Loona following closely behind as she takes in the new surroundings - there was something so foreign yet so familiar about this place which she had just entered into, almost as if it was practically waiting for her arrival. Accompanied with the metallic creaking of the Oak door’s tired hinges, the door closes shut behind them before completely disappearing, leaving no trace that there was a portal-like door in the first place.

“Do follow,” Gunther instructs while putting his Homburg hat back on, before starting to head into the North-Westerly direction, weaving in between the trees as he walks onwards.

So many questions ran through Loona’s mind, though only one could properly form into a sentence; “Wait, so, who exactly are you again? Why do you care so much about my business?”

“If you are inquiring as to what my position is exactly and as to my origins, then I am certainly permitted to explain in a limited capacity within my agreed protocol,” Gunther states, continuing to stroll onwards; “I was once - a long time ago - a living man, much like a select few within the same position which I have obtained. You see, I was deemed responsible and humble enough to acquire this position of mine from those higher forces above me - and I do mean ‘higher’ in the most literal terminology. My responsibility - as explained in Layman’s terms - is to observe interesting events between the living world and the realm to which you originate from. I also reserve the power to interfere within a limited manner if I see fit; the very same power I am utilizing by visiting you in the form of your dreams.”

“That’s… a very weird thing to say, but okay,” Loona admits, referring to the last part of the old man’s dialogue; “So you’re like an observer? A messenger? Or… What’s going on here?”

A soft, humble smile formed upon Gunther’s face; “Indeed, those are very applicable descriptions. I have been described as many things, including being a ‘Sub-Guardian’ in a way, though not in the literal sense. I have seen many things, Ms. Loona - I have seen men die in ferocious battles upon the continents and upon the seas. I have witnessed horrific battles, everything from Borodino, the Somme, and beyond. I have seen many individuals succumb to the temptations of pure evil, committing such ferocious acts which I wish I could forget. I have witnessed both natural and supernatural phenomena; These events are much all the same. But then I find the very select few which stand out to me, such as yours, and I determine that I must aid you in what you seek, which is a firm resolution to overcome the madness at hand.”

Loona decided that she didn’t need to say anything, engrossed with the information she had been provided with. The hellhound couldn’t help but note to herself that perhaps this “Sub-Guardian” could be an additional source of direction; a personified wayfinder to assist her greatly in the growing battle against the sinner now after her. As Loona continues to follow closely behind her elderly guide, she notices the faint break in the vast woodlands in the distance, signaling a clearing. Before she could proceed any further, Loona found herself almost running into the back of her guide, discovering that he had stopped.

“I’m afraid this is as far as I can take you,” Gunther solemnly informs, turning around to face Loona with a weary look in his blue eyes, his left arm outstretched to point towards the clearing; “Look forth! That clearing before you is where the source of the madness lies. Find and destroy it, and Victor Malloy’s ruthlessness shall cease for good, bringing him down along with it.”

A steadily rising feeling of anxiety arose within Loona’s gut as her ears folded back in apprehension, staring intently towards the apparent clearing. In all honesty with herself, she dreaded discovering for herself exactly what the source of the madness was, let alone what dark forces Malloy had dealt with to acquire himself such power. Loona’s thought process was cut abruptly when she felt a weary hand touch her forearm, making her jolt a little in surprise.

She turns her attention back towards Gunther who spoke in his same gentle tone of voice; “I am afraid this is where I must leave you. When you awaken shortly, do utilize the information to which I’ve given you to the best of your ability. Farewell, Ms. Loona.”

And with that, the soft-spoken old guide waltzes his way back towards where they came, leaving Loona alone to her thoughts.

Suddenly, Loona decided to call back out towards the departing man; “H-Hey, wait a minute!”

Gunther stops within his tracks, turning slowly back around to face Loona once more.

It took the hellhound a few seconds of hesitation to let out what she was intending to say before finally forcing it out, her voice cracking with a hint of doubt; “W-what if I fuck it up? What’s going to happen then?”

To Loona’s slight confusion, Gunther began shaking his head slowly, his kind eyes holding a form of reassurance within them; “Whether or not you fail is entirely up to you.”

With this final bit of advice delivered, Loona watched on as Gunther proceeded with his route, turning back around to waltz and weave through the trees with his hands clasped together politely behind his back.

Loona at last awoke from her sleep, waking up with a lethargic grunt as she lay face-up towards the ceiling within the comfort of her bed, her bedsheets in a mess from shifting around as she slept. The first immediate thought that the hellhound conjured was in regards to the bizarre fever-like dream that she had just witnessed, trying her best to decipher whether or not the spectral figure she had conversed at length with was real or a mere figment of her imagination caused by stress. Whatever the reality of the dream was didn’t necessarily matter, however; Loona’s mind was nonetheless fixated on finding out how to solve the crisis at hand, starting from today.

With a lethargic yawn and a wince, the freshly-awakened hellhound sat upright in her bed, propping her back up against the headboard with the aid of a couple of pillows. Her first follow-up thought, which was more of a second nature to her, was to grab her phone from her nightstand,

turning it on to casually flick through her social media. As soon as Loona's phone screen turned on with that same fluorescent illumination which made her eyes strain in the darkness, she was surprised to discover that a singular notification had been sent, signaling a new message. A brief flick downwards revealed that the message was from none other than Vortex, the contents reading as follows:

"Hey, L. Sorry for texting you so late. I've got a thought. I can't be around too often (got a busy schedule for the next couple days) but Morger is free to be a bodyguard to protect you if you need. Don't worry he doesn't know about what happened yesterday or about the human."

Loona was just about to accept the offer wholeheartedly until she stopped, having a more careful thought on the matter. While, yes, she may need the extra assistance somewhere in the future if needs be, however there was the matter of Morger himself; could the usually quiet and reserved male hellhound be trusted to keep Jim's presence confidential from the wider public? For the time being, Loona decided that it was best to keep the option open, promptly typing a message back towards Vortex:

"I'll think about it. Thnx Tex."

Immediately after hitting 'send', she lazily drops her phone screen-downwards on the bed before running her fingers through her messed-up hair, once again feeling the pressure of her responsibilities and the very real, potentially fatal risks that came along with it. The faint hint of pressure upon Loona's forehead signaled the beginning of a stress-induced migraine, causing her to groan in displeasure. At this point, the hellhound knew that she desperately needed a moment to retreat to an outlet which would relieve the stress, even if it was only temporary relief - and she knew exactly what that outlet would be.

With this newfound motivation to move, Loona switched on her bedside lamp before peering to her right, finding exactly what she was looking for; a spruce guitar with a vintage 'sunburst' colouration gracing the top frame propped up against the wall. With a faint smile spreading across her muzzle, Loona grabs the pristine vintage guitar by the neck and pulls it towards her, sitting up in bed as she crosses her legs together. Next, Loona proceeds to lean back over to the top drawer of her nightstand, reaching in to fetch something else; a sheet of music which had come with the guitar, albeit they were both stolen from the living world. Placing it directly in front of her peripheral vision, Loona takes a moment to read the title of this sheet of music. Printed bold letters at the top was the title of this particular music sheet: "Wild Mountain Thyme."

Loona vocalizes her mild interest towards the sheet of music with a quiet hum before beginning to hold the guitar in a manner which would allow her to finally begin playing. Letting out a soft, calming exhale through her nose, her left hand gently clasping the neck and her right positioned

over the guitar strings, the hellhound begins playing. With an intense hyper-fixation on the chords she was playing, Loona managed to follow the printed notes which were written down in fine ink with great precision, quickly becoming satisfied with her pleasant-sounding yet amateur guitar skills. To her own surprise, she manages to capture the proper rhythm and tempo of the introductory chords, giving off the illusion that she was a professional guitarist; in all honesty, Loona was proud of herself in a very self-indulgent way.

Unbeknownst to even herself, the amateur guitarist began softly humming the lyrics to the song:

"…M-hm summer time has come… and the tre-e-e-es mmm m-m-mm-ly blooming… the wild mountain thyme, grows arou-"

"What's that you're singing?"

A huge, startling wave of fright and embarrassment unexpectedly rushes over Loona to the sound of the all-too familiar voice! Her widened eyes instantly darted up from the music sheet to discover Jim beyond the foot of her bed, looking over towards her as he sat upon his own respective mattress lying horizontally relative to her own sleeping quarters. In her desire to destress, Loona had momentarily forgotten that there was a second presence within her room, to her own sheer embarrassment.

As quickly as Loona had been startled, she immediately switched back to her usual indifferent outward exterior, letting out a forced cough before replying; "Ahem! N-Nothing, just practicing."

"Whatcha practicing?"

"Guitar."

"… What's the song?"

Loona couldn't help but let out a gruff exhale, obviously not used to her privacy being breached; "And why exactly do you want to know? Just- Let me play in peace, okay?"

A knowing smirk formed across Jim's face to Loona's mild annoyance; "… You're embarrassed, aren't ya?"

"Yes! Yes, I am if you really want to know," the hellhound abruptly replies, the foreign feeling of shyness overcoming her slightly. It was more than obvious that Loona was adamant against the idea of an audience.

Jim appeared mildly confused towards the amateur guitarist's assertion; "What's there to be embarrassed about? You're good at it! Better than I will ever be, I have to say."

"No, I'm not. I'm shit at it," Loona bluntly refutes, trying her best to snap out of her stage fright disguised as moderate aggravation; "Just forget that I was even playing. Hell, forget that I even have this stupid guitar."

In what was a surprise to the embarrassed hellhound, Jim returned with a definitive response to her request; "Loona, matey. Listen to me; you're good! You actually are. In fact, no, I want to hear you play some more. I'll be your audience for ya."

Loona narrowed her eyes to a squint in suspicion of Jim's intentions, perhaps brought about by self-doubt; "… Are you.. trying to mess with me? Is that what this is?"

"Oh come on now, why would I want to do something like that?" Jim asks in the form of a partially rhetorical question, trying his best to sound reassuring.

The continually acutely flustered hellhound stammered speechlessly until regaining her ability to speak; "I-I … agh- I don't know. People can be assholes, you know? I know you're not! It's just a visceral reaction to assume that you're trying to fuck with me, that's all."

A look of full understanding resonates from Jim's eyes; "Nah I get whatcha mean, don't stress. Y-You, uh, wanna try playing again? I won't say anything, yeah? I swear."

Although the passive encouragement did help to alleviate her overwhelming embarrassment, Loona was still nonetheless conflicted on whether or not she should express her secret hobby any further in fear of being mocked for it. It took a silent, almost awkward couple of seconds to make her decision, announcing her decision on the offer after giving off a rough sigh.

“Okay, fine! I’ll play. One thing before I start, though - just.. don’t make fun of me, got it?”

The only answer that Jim gave was a mere attentive nod in assurance, instantly proving to Loona that this simplistic request was already a given. This opportunity to demonstrate her secretive passion to the one-man audience wasn’t left unanswered, with the amateur hobby-guitarist shifting the stunning vintage guitar into a more comfortable position within her grasp. After giving herself an extra couple of seconds to steady herself and focus, Loona began playing.

What first started as a slow, uneasy rough strumming quickly turned into an increasingly more pleasant-sounding repetitive tune, delicate in its gentle, reverberating sound as Loona’s fingers picked and strummed at the individual strings. The guitarist’s scarlet-red eyes focus on the music sheet in her determination to get every individual note correct. With a steady, almost silent exhale, Loona began singing in a calming, hushed tone of voice which Jim hadn’t heard from her up until this point:

“Oh, the summer-r time has come.. and the trees are swee-tly bloomin’.. The wi-ild mountain thyme - grows around the bloo-ming heather…”

“Will ya go-o, lassie, go-o.. and we’ll a-all go-o-o together, to pull wi-ild mountain thyme, all around the bloo-ming heather.. will ye go, lassie, go-o…”

The concept of music acting as a mesmerizing, moving artform was in full force throughout the performance so far, with both Loona and the accompanying human thoroughly enjoying the performance in their own way. For Jim, he was in awe at the unexpected natural talent that the hellhound before him had for playing the guitar, watching as her strumming translated into melancholic notes. For Loona, however, it was something with a little bit more complexity. The way that her fingers practically glided across the strings to create music to a degree which impressed herself gave the hellhound confidence to keep playing, feeling comfortable in an element which she didn’t usually retreat to, except on the odd occasion as a form of escapism. The melancholic nature of the folk song which Loona performed aroused a feeling of solemn melancholy within herself, causing her to begin yearning for a time in her life which didn’t even exist.

The lyrics told a most profound story of solemnity and peace within the heights of a land which Loona was personally unfamiliar with, though the sounds of how it was described in the song - the “*blooming heather*” within the mountains - made it sound all that much more tempting to retreat to. By the time that Loona had reached the final verse of the song - a repeat of the chorus no less - her eyes had become ever-so-slightly misty from how much she was putting her heart into performing

this melancholic piece. Loona's strumming got slightly louder as she finished with the final verse of this most unique composition:

"And we'll a-a-ll go-o together, to pull wi-ild mountain thyme, all around the blooming heather-r. Will ya go, lassie, go-o-o…"

With the final verse now complete and the last chord played, Loona gave herself a break with a soft sigh, looking up from the music sheet before her and towards Jim, preparing herself subconsciously for a form of ridicule for playing something so sappy. She was surprised to see that the young man wasn't preparing himself to ridicule her hobby, but instead stood with his hands in his trouser pockets while intently looking at her with his brow raised in attentive awe.

That earlier feeling of embarrassment began to arise within Loona once again, though this time in a much milder form. The hellhound's eyes shift for a moment before finally deciding to break the awkward silence; "So yeah. That was.. that. W-Whatcha think?"

"Strewth, I- uh… uff, cor blimey…" Jim stammers severely, tripping over his words after being left pleasantly speechless of the surprising performance; "W-Where'd you learn to play like that??"

The hellhound shrugs while propping her guitar back up against the wall. "Nowhere, I taught myself how to play. Been practicing for over a year now, but in secret. There's no chance in hell I'm going to let dad or anyone else discover me doing something nerdy like this. Suppose you could call it a 'guilty pleasure'."

"Ah true," the attentive human nods along; "Me, personally, don't think it's nerdy - I think it's quite dignified."

Loona sighed exhaustively, though a small appreciative smile for the compliment appeared on her muzzle. "'Dignified', 'cool', 'nerdy' - whatever you wanna call it, I don't care. But if you dare tell dad or Moxxie that I enjoy doing this, I will smack you senseless," she remarks in a half-joking manner.

Jim puts his hands up in a non-vocal way or signaling to Loona that he had no intention to do such a crass and provocative action. As he did this, a question appeared within his mind which he promptly made known; "So, yeah, what made you take up the guitar?"

“I was trying to find an outlet to deal with my stress levels, looking around for ideas to see which worked for me,” Loona explains; “Pretty sure I was in the living world and I came across this guy on a street corner. He was playing this sick-looking acoustic guitar, and I thought; ‘Hey, I wanna get into that action. That sounds cool’. And before you worry, no; this isn’t the same guitar. But yeah, whenever I feel particularly stressed out, I get away from it all and play that same stupid song you just listened to.”

“Hah- righto! Ah well, look at ya - got yourself a pass-time,” Jim nods his head with a grin and his hand in his pockets. His smile faded slightly when the last portion of Loona’s explanation finally hit him; “Is that why you’re playing it this morning?”

“What do you mean?”

“Is something stressing you out? Well, other than the obvious.”

“Eh… I wouldn’t say stressing me out, more so freaking me out,” Loona corrects Jim’s initial assumption, beginning to rub her forearm in slight discomfort.

Jim slowly nods his head, fully acknowledging the hellhound’s apparent disconcertion. “You wanna talk about it?”

The notion of talking about the source of her unsettled state prompted Loona to hesitate for a moment, perhaps a visceral reaction stemming from her years of solitude. Despite her initial reservations about opening up about it, she nonetheless begins talking.

“… I had a really fucked-up dream last night. Actually, fucked-up is the wrong word, it was more bizarre if anything. I woke up in a chair in this old-fashioned office, like the ones you see in those shitty old movies. I wasn’t tied down or anything so I got up, and eventually this old dude walked in, started talking about how he knew about Malloy, and he wanted to help us get out of this mess.”

“Ah yeah?”

“Yup,” Loona confirms; “So we got to talking and eventually he took me out to this forest. There was a clearing he took me to see, said that it was the source of Malloy’s ‘madness’ and that I have to find and destroy it. And yeah, I know it's just a stupid dream, but… I don’t think he was my

imagination - I think whoever this guy is will actually help us. ‘Cause he said something along the lines of how he was “communicating with me through my dreams”.”

Jim thought about this detail for a moment, his brow furrowed in a moment of pondering; “So like a guardian?”

The hellhound nods her head in agreement; “Something along those lines, I guess.”

Jim paced around slowly with his hands on his hips, “Hm. So what now, do you reckon?”

Loona began to formulate a plan for the day in her head, explaining her intentions to her tenant; “I think… I think when we get into work today, I’ll have a dig around. Pretty sure I can find who set out the hit on Malloy in the first place, see if he can tell us anything.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jim acknowledges; “… By the way, you reckon your old man’s sober enough for work?”

In perfect timing, a voice reverberated from outside; “Aaaaargh… my fucking HEAD!!”

A wide smirk spread across Loona’s face, accompanied by the snicker; “Welp! There’s your answer.”

“So nothing, Clyde?”

“Nothin’. It’s bloody hopeless, Trevor. We’re at a complete dead-end.”

“Have you seen anything like this?”

“Nup! As I said, it’s like the bastard’s vanished off the face of the earth!”

“Right. So, did you check-”

“I’ve checked everywhere, Pearson; I went as far north as Toowoomba and as far south as Wallangarra, matey. Also tried as far westward as Inglewood. I even checked with the boys in New South Wales, in Tenterfield - sweet nothin’. Face it, Trev’; He’s up and fair dinkum vanished! Our only hope now I reckon is if we declare a missing person’s case, get the community involved. Maybe then we’ll have a better chance.”

“I’m already stretched thin as it is, Clyde. I’m really not certain if we have enough resources to commit to a search and rescue, as much as it pains me to say it. This youth crime nonsense has really buggered us up in the logistic field of things.”

“How about this; I’ll bring me own boys down from Kilgowie, and we’ll cover for ya with regards to everyday police work, yeah? We’ll pool together.”

“If you can do that for me, Clyde, that’d be wonderful.”

“Hm.”

“Sandra’s also gone out to Warwick to get some bloke she reckons can help us, says he’s some ‘family friend’ or something or rather.”

“When ya think she’ll be back?”

“It’s been a good solid two hours, so I reckon she’ll be back any min-”

“Hey, boys. Sorry I took a while.”

“Ah, Sandy! We were just talking about ya. Didja find him?”

“Thankfully. Hey, Vasily! Are you coming in or what?”

“Am coming in. Apologies.”

“Aight, boys, this here’s Vasily Antonov! He’s done high-risk detective work for twenty years now, specializes in homicides, missing persons cases, and so on; all that good stuff.”

“Pleasure to finally meet ya, Mr. Antonov. You reckon you could help us out with this?”

“If all go to plan, yes. What help you need?”

“Just with a young local bloke, James Steele. He was reported missing yesterday. Afraid we’re out of resources and out of ideas of where to find him, was starting to wonder where to go from here.”

“You have my word that I assist you to end. Can you escort me to young man’s house? I start immediately, waste no time.”

“Oh, sure! Right this way, Mr. Antonov.”

Just under two hours had passed by, and by this time, Loona, Jim (wearing his freshly washed shirt), and a hungover Blitz had arrived back once more to IMP Headquarters, with Loona taking full responsibility of driving and carrying the relevant paperwork while Blitz desperately tried to cure himself of his throbbing migraine. Loona was essentially performing a juggling act as she made her way up the elevator, because not only did she have to carry the folder of paperwork for the day, but in addition had to carry Jim over her shoulder who was once again shrouded in the blanket for his own protection. A strained grunt left the hellhound’s mouth as she trudged out of the elevator when it arrived on their floor, immediately propping Jim back onto his feet and removing the bed sheet shroud off of him, not bothering to wait to remove it when they were inside the headquarters itself. Awaiting for their slightly late arrival was an impatient Moxxie, waiting by the door with his arms folded, a look of dissatisfaction worn on his face.

“You’re late,” Moxxie bluntly states to the hellhound who rolled her eyes in response.

“Yeah no shit, Sherlock. Tomorrow I’ll be on time, but you’ll be stupid forever,” Loona smirks in a disparaging way.

Moxxie let out an annoyed groan, trying his hardest to ignore the derogatory remark made against his level of intelligence. What stopped him was seeing Blitz with his head resting in his hands, wincing from the throbbing headache he brought upon himself. To save not only himself from the potential argument, but as well as grant mercy to his hungover boss, Moxxie decided to keep quiet and protest against the insult silently.

Loona asks a question to her lone coworker as she unlocks the front door, pushing it open as soon as the lock shifts; “So where’s Millie?”

“She’ll be here in a minute. Just had to pick up some things for the kitchen,” Moxxie explains bluntly as he makes his way into the kitchen.

“Aight,” Loona acknowledges, proceeding to make her way over to the front desk to store the files in their respective drawers.

Meanwhile, Blitz practically drunkenly slogged his way over to the couch and crashed right into it back-first, beating Jim to the rights to the couch, at least for the moment. The human resorted to pacing aimlessly around the room before finally deciding to lean up against the wall with his arms folded, looking down at his freshly clean shirt. A water bottle from the living world rested in his hands as he drank the contents slowly, at last feeling nourished after having been starved for the past twenty-four hours.

Moxxie’s voice calls out from the kitchen as sound of the fridge door opening sounded off; “And I take that you’re finally confronting your responsibilities today, Loona?”

“Hey! You just worry about your side of the arrangement. I’ll worry about mine,” Loona blurts out in a slightly aggravated manner, though seemingly not in the mood to deal with such trivial back-and-forths, at least for one day.

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll believe that when I see evidence,” Moxxie remarks snidely; “Let’s just hope that everything goes to pla-.. uh, sir? … Sir??”

“WHAT,” Blitz shrieks from the couch, still trying his hardest to overcome the hangover.

“You do realize you’ve left the milk out of the fridge, right?”

Blitz was definitely not in the right frame of mind to deal with trivial complaints; “And?! You can still drink it, Mox’, there’s nothing wrong with it!”

“But it literally smells spoiled, it’s gross!”

“So? What’s the big deal? Gives it more flavor,” Blitz slurs his words, feeling a bit of bile rise up in his throat before managing to swallow it.

Moxxie seemed almost perturbed by his boss’ comment; “A-And how do you know that, exactly?”

This question sent Blitz into a miniature ranting phase; “Put it this way, Mox’; an imp like myself likes to live a little, take a bit of risk. Sometimes, to live, you have to rebel against the system. For me, that’s been rebelling against “expiration dates”. What good are they for, anyway? Just another ploy by big food companies to force us to buy more of their crap.”

“... Sir, have you been drinking expired milk-”

“Yup! I’ve been at it for three months now.”

An audible dry-heave emanated from within the confines of the office kitchen, to the amusement of Loona who was too slightly disgusted by Blitz’s confession.

“Okay! That’s too fucked even for me,” Jim decides to comment, feeling more bewildered rather than disgusted.

“I’m surprised that you’re even shocked by this,” Loona snickers, scrolling through her phone while sitting at her accustomed post in the office.

“Mate, your old man’s drinking expired milk. How aren’t you that shocked?”

The hellhound gave off a passive shrug; “Meh. I don’t put anything past him at this point.”

Just as Loona finishes her sentence, the door swung open to reveal that Millie had just arrived, carrying two large paper bags-full of groceries. A polite morning greeting from her is given to Blitz, who merely slurred his words with a pained groan; it appeared as if the hangover was alleviating on its own accord to Blitz’s utter relief. The newly arrived imp makes her way into the kitchen, giving a cheery greeting to her husband who welcomes her with open arms, before then helping her out with resting said large paper bags on the kitchen counter.

Jim’s attention is drawn towards Blitz who was beginning to address him in a clearly passive-aggressive tone of voice, most likely brought about by the pounding migraine which ailed him tremendously; “You know, Jim, I’ve got a question - what *_hic_!* .. w-what exactly is the point in you?”

“Come again, mate?”

“You heard me,” Blitz repeats bluntly in a slightly intoxicated manner, his eyes so unfocused and drowsy as if he was about to fall asleep at any minute; “All you’ve been doing here is *_hic_!* s-sit around.. and do butt-fuck nothing, while you force my Loonie-Tooney over there to *_hic_!* s-sort your problems out. W-Where’s the gratitude? Why don’t you just.. I dunno, help us out with shit that needs doing??”

“If you’re asking me to put a black mark against my name by committing murder, then you can piss right off,” Jim sternly protested, firm in his resolution against the matter; “I thought I already told you this a month ago when you were squatting in my house.”

In a rather unexpected twist to Jim, Blitz appeared to be mildly confused; “Who said anything about murder~?”

The young bushman squinted his eyes in a growingly suspicious manner; “Then what are you suggesting?”

An almost insinuating smirk spread across Blitz’s mug; “Well… you’re a well-built kind of guy, I suppose you could do some “things” for me, hm? Think of it ash.. p-paying rent!”

Jim was finally at his wits end, already sick of Blitz’s teasing on the matter of doing him a one-sided favor; “Oh, give me strength.. Alright, go on then! What do you want from me?”

Blitz’s eyes lit up mischievously, knowing that he had finally gotten his way; “That’s the fuckin’ spirit! Alright, lishen up - do you see that sickly neon-pink.. whorehouse over there?”

“Okay! No.” The mere mention of Verosika’s Studio sent alarm bells ringing in Loona’s mind, forcing her to directly intervene; “There’s no way you’re subjecting Jim to Verosika, Blitz! Are you insane?? Oh wait - we’re talking about you here, of course you’re insane…”

“Oh come on, Loonie, j-jusht hear me out! He’ll sneak on in there, poke around for any intelligensh that we can use against her, and boom! And if he gets caught, sho what? He’s just a human, what’s she goin’ to **hic*!* d-do??”

Loona shot her borderline dim-witted father an unimpressed, disbelieving look towards her father, her eyes shifting towards the kitchen where Moxxie currently resided, helping his wife and completely oblivious to the conversation being had outside. By some otherworldly miracle, it appeared as if Blitz realized what Loona was insinuating:

“… Ohhh, right. B-But even then, we’ll cover him! If that succubitch tries anything against him, we’ll-”

“No. We’re not having this discussion, Blitz,” Loona interrupts Blitz’s thought process, firmly putting her foot down on the matter at hand; “Now go sleep it off - I can still smell the alcohol from here. You’re clearly still shitfaced.”

Blitz sneered in protest, grumbling in protest under his alcohol-scented breath before heaving himself off the couch, staggering back onto his feet and waltzing lazily into his office, almost tripping over as he clumsily slammed the door behind him.

In almost impeccable timing, Millie came trotting back out into the main lobby, gazing towards Blitz's office in a confused manner; "What's up with Blitz?"

"Drunk," Loona informs bluntly with her eyes glued firmly onto her phone screen.

"Huh..," Millie vocalizes with a raised eyebrow in realization, proceeding to turn her attention towards Jim who was still leant up by the window; "And how are you feeling, mister?"

"As well as I can be, I reckon. I'll survive, hopefully," Jim states indifferently, looking towards the figure which was half his size and height; "W-Whatcha up to then?"

"Just eatin' something before we head off," Millie explains casually in her Southern drawl, shifting her posture a little to the side; "Hey, listen. I know that our work may be a little.. Eheh, let's say 'extreme' for a simple human like you."

"That's to say the least," Jim mumbles, a chill running up his spine at the thought of assassinations; "Hey, I gotta ask. With me being here; that doesn't make me… an accessory to this stuff, does it?"

"What? Naw, not at all! At least I don't think so," the female imp attempts to reassure, completely understanding the concerned human's deep-rooted reservations; "Jus' stay out of it as much as you can, and you'll stay clean! Mmkay?"

"Hah- That's my intention anyhow," Jim let out a chuckle through his partially toothy grin, pushing himself off the wall to stand completely upright.

Millie let off a soft smile before turning her head towards the receptionist; "Ya been treatin' this boy right, Loona?"

Loona sat within her office chair, groaning in brief annoyance before looking up from her phone in preparation for whatever snarky comment would come her way; "Why wouldn't I be?"

“Oh, you know,” Millie goes on, obviously trying to make fun for whatever reason; “With your attitude problems, it seems almost inevitable that you’d lash out like a wild dog without warning! Pretty sure it’s a ‘hellhound’ thing.”

The hellhound’s right eye slightly twitched as she maintained her signature indifferent expression on her face, letting out a dismissive grunt before looking back down at her phone; “Whatever.”

This rather anticlimactic reaction took Millie by surprise, leaving her speechless; it wasn’t like Loona to simply ignore comments against her person. Usually a wave of threatening stances and verbal abuse would be directed her way on any other occasion, yet this time the hellhound seemed to be completely unphased.

Millie felt rather compelled to check up on Loona’s state of mind; “Loona, are you-”

“I’m not saying anything,” Loona calmly interrupts with pure indifference, continuing to glare down at her phone that contained nothing in particular.

Now the female imp was perplexed yet pleasantly surprised, pondering to herself what exactly had gotten into her coworker to cause her to act so relaxed in defiance against the prodding words. Millie chooses to end the disjointed conversation then and there, shrugging to herself as she heads back towards the kitchen.

“Shoot. You dealt with that well, didn’t ya,” Jim states to Loona, just as mildly surprised as Millie was with regards to her actions.

“Meh. I couldn’t give less of a shit today,” Loona smirks, looking up from her phone towards Jim while talking to him with a whisper; “Told you that nerdy guitar crap helps me chill out, didn’t I?”

The human exhaled through his nose in what was a suppressed titter, finding hilarity yet truth in the hellhound’s comment.

In no time at all, the next hour passed by rather quickly, with Millie and Moxxie since leaving, taking it upon themselves to go about their daily assignments in accordance to their assassination contracts, according to the compromise agreed upon the day prior. Their currently out-of-action employer, Blitz, snored loudly from within his office in an almost obnoxiously loud fashion,

abiding by his daughter's instructions to sleep the stubborn remnants of his intoxicated lethargy away.

Meanwhile within the main lobby of the IMP headquarters, Loona finally got to work. As asserted yesterday as part of the compromise, she had taken it upon herself to begin sifting through the files with all of their past clients' details stored inside, analyzing each file with great focus to determine who exactly had ordered the hit on Malloy in the first place. She had also employed the help of Jim who flicked through each of his own chosen files with content, the human reading each document carefully with a mixture of intrigue and bewilderment.

After much tribulation with flicking through each individual file to no avail, Loona groans dramatically in defeat, throwing the document she held on the desk and rubbing her fingers between her eyes; "Argh- dammit, it's hopeless! I'm never gonna find that fucker! You got anything, Jim?"

"Nup. Just a whole lotta nothin'," Jim bluntly replies as he shook his head, lazily chucking his own respective file back onto the front desk.

Loona bares her teeth in frustration, placing her palm on her forehead as she tries almost desperately to remember the client's name. The hellhound swore that the name was on the tip of her tongue, yet so far out of her reach within the back of her mind.

She points her finger at Jim, turning to him for a hint; "You sure you don't know of any names that would be affiliated with that prick, Jim? Not even any town rumors??"

This made Jim think for a moment, looking up towards the ceiling in thought; "I mean, there's been a few rumors that have circulated over the years. Not sure if they hold any weight to them, though."

Loona leans slightly over the desk, restarting her search through the sprawled-out files; "Such as…?"

"Uh… oh shit, fucken- uhhh… Pretty sure there was an "Elroy" floating around, though that turned out to be bullshit," the young man thought aloud; "Uhh… There was also a woman who had lost her husband, a widow, though that was just some twisted attempt at a "joke" - some joke, huh. … Oh shit, that's right!!"

Loona's ears picked up at the sound of Jim's apparent "eureka" moment; "What? Go on, tell me!"

Jim abided by Loona's demand for answers; "Tyler! Francis Tyler! Try that name!"

The amateur sleuth hellhound's eyes widened and lit up in hope as she began hastily flicking through the files in alphabetical order, relieved that a sense of direction had been handed to her!

A, B, C ... D ... E ...

F!

Immediately after finding the so-desired letter, the hellhound began flicking through each individual file carefully, muttering under her breath; "Florence… another Florence… Ben? Fuck sakes Blitz, learn to spell… Frank… Finnegan; weird name… Francis! Fuck yes!"

With great anticipation, Loona practically tore the file right out of the filing cabinet before flicking it wide open and placing it on the desk. Sure enough, it was their guy…

Francis Kenneth Tyler | 37 y/o | Convicted Second-Degree Murderer, Twice-Convicted Arsonist and Professional Con-Artist | Desired Target: Victor Ian Malloy

A huge triumphant grin spread across her muzzle, a wave of hopeful relief rushing over her! She had found it; a small first step towards the ultimate goal of eradicating Malloy! And she knew exactly who to call in order to find this "*Francis*." Wasting no time at all, she grabs her phone and begins calling someone, immediately holding the phone up to her ear.

"… Yes, hello? … Morger? … Yeah, it's Loona. Hey listen, I need you for something."

Sleuth-Hound Revisited

Morger - the tough-built and reserved Doberman-Type Hellhound - created footfall upon the pavement as he briskly made his way towards the business center of Imp City, having received a call from Loona to come visit her at her place of work. He hadn't received much detail as to what the reason for the out-of-the-ordinary request was, except that it was "somewhat urgent" and that Loona needed his help; something about the current location of a sinner which she sought after for reasons that were currently unknown to him. Upon asking as to what the reason was, Loona simply said that it was easier if he came to see for himself, which only served to arouse more suspicion within him.

The light and dark-gray hellhound lit a cigarette as he continued to make headway across the pavement, almost bumping into an aggravated imp upon rounding a corner. A low-guttural, menacing growl from Morger convinced the imp to back off after having since tried to confront the hellhound for his clumsiness. Having watched the rather admittedly brave imp scurry away like a roach, Morger continued onwards, at last being able to see the tower block to his immediate right off into the distance, the protruding artificial horns towards the top of the towering structure signaling that it was, indeed, the right address.

"Mmmh… Here we go…" the lone hellhound mumbles to himself before taking a long pull of his newly lit-up cigarette. A long, drawn-out exhale through his nose causes the smoke to blow entirely out of his snout, causing him to cough slightly.

Morger strides right past the metallic mesh gates, diverting away from them in the opposite direction across the street, at last reaching the entrance doors to the tower block. Whatever doubt that Morger had with regards to the location of Loona's work was swept away as he noticed the small paper sign which was roughly plastered on the glass door; "*IMP Headquarters*", it read in black printed-out letters.

With a growing desire to get the task over and done with so he could return home and sleep, Morger walks right through the entrance doors and towards the singular elevator inside. Wasting no time at all, the hellhound lazily jabs the "up" button to call the elevator down to the ground floor, before taking one final pull of his cigarette and discarding the smoldering butt on the floor, stomping it out with his foot. To his mild surprise, the elevator didn't take too much time to return to the ground floor as it had done so many times before, the doors rolling open with a light metallic creaking which allowed the lone visitor to step inside. As soon as he was completely inside, Morger pressed the button for access to the seventh floor, prompting the metallic doors to roll shut before the elevator itself began its ascent.

The male hellhound now traveling up the lift had planned this to be a rather uneventful and mundane visit, simply wanting to see the "action" before dealing with it and returning home without a hitch. Little did he know, however, that the reality of the situation had other ideas for how this "uneventful and mundane" situation would play out…

DING!

After what felt like no time at all, the elevator finally arrives at the seventh floor, the doors rolling open once more to allow for Morger to exit the ascending room. With a slightly exacerbated exhale and his hands tucked snugly into his jacket's pockets, the male hellhound steps outwards onto the tiles, strolling onwards through the hallway as he quickly approaches the singular door to the right of the hallway. Morger was quick to spot the crudely painted "*I.M.P.*" lettering on the glass, clearly telling him which specific company inhabited that particular part of the office building.

With slightly indifferent, wandering scarlet-red eyes, Morger walks right up towards the entrance door, but not before looking through the horizontal viewing windows to peer inside. The reserved male hellhound in question didn't know what he expected to see, whether it was something mundane or something more dramatic than he initially anticipated. Of course, however, he did expect to see Loona sitting behind her front desk - due to her position within IMP being that of a receptionist - which indeed he found her doing so, sitting idly by the front desk with her feet propped up comfortably on the surface. What he didn't expect to see was the human leant up against the wall to Loona's immediate right, glancing right back at him with a look of attentiveness in his eyes.

Morger squinted in disbelief as to what he was seeing; "What in the-? No fucking way…"

The male hellhound abruptly made the decision to make his way inside, opening the door swiftly before inviting himself in, maintaining his perplexed yet curious gaze towards the human who was staring in a moderately suspicious manner right back at him. The sudden disturbance in the periodic silence caught Loona off-guard, her attention now fully focused on the astonished fellow hellhound standing in front of the entrance door.

"Oh shit, Morger! Listen, thanks for coming. I-I really need your help right now," Loona begins to explain, finally noticing just how understandably dumbfounded Morger appeared in regards to Jim's presence.

Morger's mouth hung slightly agape with his brow furrowed in bafflement; "Umm, Loona? T-That's not a human, is it?"

Loona's eyes darted to the right of her, realizing who he was referring to, trying to force a nervous grin with her ears folded back; "Oh, fu-! Uhh.. I-Is it bad if I say yes?"

"… Loona? How and why is there a human here??"

The hellhound receptionist stammers speechlessly, completely at a loss of where to begin; "Listen, I know it looks weird! C-Can I at least have, like, a minute to explain myself here? This isn't what it looks like!"

"Uh, no; this is exactly what it looks like," Morger bluntly interjects in a blunt tone; "There's a human, standing *RIGHT* next to you, and he's gawking at me as if I'm the most interesting thing in hell- can you stop doing that by the way? It's freaking me out."

Jim was quick to abide by the unfamiliar hellhound's request, averting his eyes away quickly in order to not get on his bad side - he had had enough confrontation for one week, after all.

Loona couldn't help but grit her teeth in anxiousness; "Okay, yes, that's a human! But again, hear me out; I *swear* I can explain!"

The bewildered male hellhound, perhaps in an effort to understand the situation, gave Loona the benefit of the doubt; "Go on then. I'm listening."

Convinced that she now had Morger's full attention, Loona let out a restricted exhale, gathering her nerves before beginning. "Okay, so.. Jim, this is Morger. Morger, this.. This is Jim."

Morger's eyes momentarily avert away from the female hellhound and back towards the human, the awkwardness of the situation at hand very much present; "Uh.. hello."

Jim, who too was feeling the awkward consensus in the room, returned the greeting with the addition of a very stiff nod; "Yeah, G'day."

A sudden thought appeared within Morger's thoughts which compelled him to ask the suddenly nagging question; "Hold on. How exactly do you two know each other?"

Loona let out a gruff sigh, pained with having to repeat the same explanation over and over; "Okay, Listen. Long story short, I got too overconfident with a job, I fucked it up, I got stuck in the living world, Jim found me almost dying, he saved my life, blah blah blah. And now, I'm returning the favor by saving *his* hide - capiche?"

"Uh-huh.. U-Um, look; I'm sorry Loona, I'm not too sure where this is going," Morger bluntly states, though he was trying his hardest to understand; "So why exactly is this human's safety *your* concern?"

The female hellhound felt compelled to give herself a facepalm, running her hand down her face; "Nevermind that! I just need your help, okay? I need some intel from you, 'cause I know you know where there's seedy sinner bars and all that jazz. There's a guy I need to talk to, h-he was a client of ours and the reason as to why I went to Australia in the first place."

Morger seemed taken aback by the name-drop, having not heard such a name for a location before; "*Aust*-what now? W-Where the hell is that?"

Loona completely disregarded Morger's inquiry as she continued onwards to her question; "Are you familiar with a '*Francis Tyler*'?"

Now Morger was even more perplexed, trying to wrap his head around everything which was thrown at him like a football to the face; "Who are these- Loona, what are these names you're dropping?? I'm just a bodyguard for one of those bars - you know; just a doorman. It's not like I remember the names off the top of my head, I couldn't give less of a shit about them!"

"I'm not asking you to remember, Morger; I'm asking if you've got the guy on your record," Loona emphatically explains, trying her hardest to get the fellow hellhound to cooperate with her.

The male hellhound scratches the side of his face in thought, wondering as to what exactly he had practically gotten himself into; "I mean.. I could check for you? Is that what you want??"

Loona nods her head almost desperately; “Yes! If you could do that, and find out where he resides, that would be greatly appreciated!”

An exacerbated, almost tired exhale left Morger’s mouth as he put his hands on his hips in thought, dipping his head towards the ground to think about the request. While he didn’t know the present human before him next to a fur-covered bar of soap, he did know Loona from the many parties she had attended with himself present. After weighing up his options in regards to the situation at hand, Morger finally announces his informed decision.

“Okay. Fine,” Morger at long last concedes; “I’ll do this for you just this once. Hell, I’ll even track this “*Francis Tyler*” down as well if you need, maybe even.. fuck, I don’t know, see if I can coax some info out of him for you and your… pet human here.”

“*He’s not my damn pet*,” Loona mumbles from under her breath, still deeply annoyed by the notion as Jim was.

A deep, elongated exhale erupted from Morger’s person as he pulled out his phone, proceeding to head to a corner of the office to call a bit more privately. Loona and Jim watch on as he appears to select a number from speed-dial, before then holding his phone up to his ear. The faint buzzing of the phone attempting to call is heard, until the caller at the other end appears to finally answer. With this prompt to act, Morger began speaking.

“Yeah, boss? That you? … It’s Morger. … Yeah, I’m doing alright for myself. You? … Alright. … Well I hope it gets better. Look, I called you to see if you could check something for me? … Just a name. … Francis Tyler. … Why? Just for a friend of mine, she’s been looking for him. … Okay, thank you. So a minute? … Mkay, thanks.”

Morger then lowered the phone from his ear as he muted his end of the line, allowing for him to speak freely to the office’s two other occupants; “The boss will check for me. He won’t be long.”

“Okay, good,” Loona replies with a relieved expression before continuing; “Listen, thanks for doing that for me. I-I’ll repay you somehow, drinks are on me or something like that.”

If the minuscule smile which appeared on the male hellhound’s muzzle was anything to go by, he appeared to consider this offer fondly; “I’ll keep that in mind, thanks,” Morger states, before turning his curious attention back towards Jim; “Um… okay, so.. why are you after this particular sinner in the first place?”

Jim decided to fill in Morger with a little bit more context regarding the issue at hand, despite his reservations about the newcomer which were growing smaller by the second; “It’s not Tyler who we’re after, really; he’s a means to and end so to speak.”

This tidbit of information managed to catch Morger’s attention, both a slight tilt of his head and his ears pricking up signaling as such; “How do you mean?”

“There’s a really powerful sinner that wants our necks, and this ‘*Francis*’ guy the only moron we can find who could possibly know more about him,” Loona decides to interject, taking over for Jim with regards to explaining; “Like, there’s no other way to put this; If we don’t find out more about Malloy and how to beat his ass, then we’ll both be turned into literal fucking mincemeat! You see why this is a big deal for us?”

The sincerity within Loona’s voice managed to help Morger realize exactly how serious and real the stakes were; “Shit… I mean, I still don’t understand why this guy’s after your necks in the first place. But if it’s that serious, then yeah; guess I’m helping the both of yo-”

Morger stops right at the end of his sentence as the sound of his boss’ voice faintly emanates from his phone, prompting him to immediately answer; “Give me a second- Yeah, boss? Any luck? … You sure it’s the same name? … Aight, that’s good. So has he made any other reservations? … Tonight? Hah! Alcoholic bastard. ‘Kay, thanks for that, boss.”

The male hellhound then hung up the phone before sliding it back into his pocket; “You two are in luck - He doesn’t come around all the time, but he’ll be in tonight. S-So what’s the plan, what do you wanna do with him?”

“Suppose you two could try interrogating him. Maybe beat it out of him if need be,” Jim suggests as he scratched the back of his head from an itch; “I can’t do it, ‘cause if word gets out that I’m down here, then, well…”

Morger gestures his hand in a signal to the human that he understood; “Yeah yeah, I know. But how to lure him in? That’s the question…”

A conspiring, almost mischievous smirk began to emerge upon Loona’s face, her eyes shifting in a most conniving way like a wild fox plotting how to swiftly hone in on its prey; “Hm. You know

what? I think I've got just the idea."

"Alright. This is it," Morger announces to Loona, instructing her with a hand gesture to park the company van across the street from the nightclub, its reddish-orange interior atmospheric lights seeping through the cracks of the front door as music blared loudly from within.

Standing in front of the door were two hellhounds dressed in black t-shirts and an earpiece lodged in their ears, standing guard at the front as an extensive line of both sinners and imps stood outside, obviously waiting for their respective terms to enter. Luckily for both Loona and Morger, the owner of the nightclub had called them back to give them a brief yet informative description of their '*target*'; he was around five-foot-six, usually wore a sleeveless shirt and a pair of long, dusty-yellow trousers and a pair of brown shoes, and was a decrepit-looking marsupial in his outward appearance.

"You sure he's going to be here tonight?" Loona asks out of precaution, her scarlet-red eyes intently scanning the crowd to try and find '*Francis Tyler's*' distinct appearance.

"Of course. He always shows up whenever he makes a booking," Morger reassures in a harsh whisper; "He's usually here from around the time we open until we have to kick him out when we shut. He literally has no life.. or- well, afterlife."

"No kidding," Loona nods, her eyes narrowed to a deeply focused squint; "Where are you, you little rat bastard..?"

"He'll come. It's just a matter of waiting," Morger calmly states while pulling out a bottle of whiskey, taking a swig before offering the beverage to Loona. The driver, however, flatly declined the offer; all that her mind was focused on was finding as much information about Malloy as she possibly could.

"Are you sure this is the right place?" A slightly anxious Loona asks for the umpteenth time that night, obviously not wanting to make any mistakes which would cost her dearly.

Morger let out a suppressed exhale; "Yes, it's the right place. I literally work here, stop worrying."

“Right. Sorry. … Oh hey, have you talked to ‘Tex today at all?”

“Not today, no. Why?”

Loona let out a strained grunt as she rubbed the back of her neck, successfully massaging out a knot that had developed; “*Ngh*! J-Just want to make sure he’s okay, after what happened to him.”

The male hellhound accompanying Loona became somewhat confused yet concerned; “I’m sorry, what? W-What happened to him?”

A sudden feeling of hesitancy overcame Loona, making her unsure as to whether or not she should tell the truth as to what happened. Despite her reservations against explaining what had occurred due to the shock of having to witness it firsthand, Loona decided to let the truth out regardless, feeling as if it was the correct thing to do.

“Don’t freak out, but he got beat up pretty bad the other day, back at the office,” Loona admits, her eyes still fixated upon the sluggishly moving queue.

Morger was shocked to hear something which would seem ludicrous in any other given situation; “Excuse me? You’re fuckin’ with me. By who??”

“Let’s just say that he also knows about the situation,” Loona cautiously remarks, deliberately refusing to reveal any certain names in fear that it may conjure bad luck in some form or another.

If the reality of the situation that Loona faced hadn’t settled within Morger’s mind before, it definitely did upon hearing of Vortex’s apparent injuries which temporarily put him out of action. The male hellhound’s eyes widened in steadily-rising realization; “Right.. So he knows about the sinner?”

“Yep. ‘Tex met him face-to-face, believe it or not. He was his hostage, actually,” Loona informs, still looking outwards into the crowd.

“Huh. A-And about the human?”

“Uh-huh. They met each other as well.”

“… Does he know about-”

“Look, Morger; I appreciate that you’ve got a whole lot of questions you want to ask me, but can you save it for later?”

“Okay, okay, got it. I’ll stop asking,” Morger was quick to correct himself, before once more shifting his attention back towards the slow-moving queue; “... One more question though.”

Loona’s eyes darted sharply back towards her passenger for a split second before returning swiftly back towards the queue which began to shift once more; “Yeah, what.”

“Speaking of that human, where is he?”

“With Millie, back at the apartment,” Loona casually reveals; “I don’t trust Blitz to not do something stupid with him, so I asked her to watch over him. She accepted, on the condition that I don’t give Moxxie any shit for the next few days.”

A suppressed chuckle sounded off from Morger as a notion entered his mind; “Tch- Like a babysitter, huh?”

It appeared that this description seemed almost humorous to Loona, the female hellhound letting out a snorting laugh before remarking with a grin; “Yeah, pretty much!”

Morger couldn’t help but replicate Loona’s humored grin with one of his own, finding it oddly hilarious that a human would need a being - an imp no less - that was half his size to watch over him. The absurdity of the notion lingered in the male hellhound’s mind until his eyes darted back towards the crowd, trying his best to stay focused on the pressing task at hand. Morger’s smile was completely wiped off his face when he noticed a particular crowd member within the queue, his attention immediately drawn towards the individual.

A light yet harsh gasp left Morger's mouth as he jammed his finger towards the crowd, announcing his findings with a harsh whisper; "Loona, look!"

Loona was startled out of her concentration before immediately refocusing her gaze towards where Morger was gesturing towards; "What? Where??"

"Over there!" Morger informs, jabbing his finger against the windshield to clarify the direction.

It took Loona a few short seconds to realize where Morger was looking, but sure enough, she found the apparent target her passenger had singled out; "Oh. Wait, are you sure that's him?"

Morger nods slowly as he continues to track their target intently; "It has to be. Definitely matches up with the description."

At this point in her elaborate operation, Loona was quickly growing impatient; "What are we waiting for, then? Let's go, the fucker's right there!"

"Woah woah! Wait a second, not yet! Watch."

Loona couldn't believe what she was hearing; "W-What do you mean 'watch'? What's there to watch? He's right there! We can catch him-"

"Loona. Stop," Morger bluntly told Loona in a bid to dampen her eagerness; "Just be patient and watch."

The uncompromising instruction Loona was given by Morger seemed completely ludicrous to her, an overwhelming eagerness to confront this 'Francis Tyler' completely clouding her best judgments. However, despite her best interests in the heat of the moment, Loona stayed put within her sea, tracking the sickly marsupial-looking sinner as he made his way up towards the front of the queue. One of the hellhound bouncers, the one to the left who was holding a clipboard which presumably had a list of names, glanced with professional indifference between the sinner before him and the clipboard, perhaps checking to see if he was on the guest-list for that evening. After a

couple more seconds of uncompromising stagnation, the hellhound bouncer cocked his head slightly to his left where his partner stood, before giving him a nod of confirmation.

It was quickly apparent to both Morger and Loona that this was a prompt to act, watching on as the second bouncer approached the sinner and immediately grabbed him by the scruff of the neck! The sinner tried his utmost best to resist the bouncer's strength, flailing his arms in confusion before being properly restrained with both his arms being pinned behind his back! A quick kick behind the legs from the security guard rendered the uncooperative sinner limp, the bouncer in question then proceeding to drag the apprehended sinner into an adjacent alleyway a few paces away from the entrance!

Loona was left completely stunned at this rather unexpected turn of events, beginning to fear that she had just missed her chance; "Hey, what the fuck! Where is he taking him?!"

To Loona's utter bewilderment, Morger began to chuckle before speaking; "Relax! He's not going anywhere. I told them to take him in beforehand."

"Wait, you did??"

"Mm-hm! He'll dump him in one of the backrooms. There, he'll be tied up and restrained so we can do what we have to do," Morger explains thoroughly with a certain level of smugness; "I have connections in this club, you know? I can request crap like this."

"… Morger, you may be the most reclusive guy I know, but man, you pull off the best shit sometimes," Loona concedes with a baffled laugh before composing herself, swinging the car door open with force and practically jumping out; "C'mon! Let's go!"

With an enthusiastic spring in her step, Loona began sprinting across the road and straight into the alleyway where the bouncer had dragged her target, practically leaving Morger behind in the proverbial dust who was yelling for her to wait for him! The pursuing hellhound sprints right down the alleyway with echoing footfall towards the dimly-lit door to her immediate left, the fluorescent bulb above it flickering slightly as she practically skids to a stop against the coarse pavement!

"Loona, wait! Huff- W-Wait up!"

Morger with a wheezing breath at last caught up with an enthusiastic Loona who was watching the back door intensely, wanting to get right into business as soon as possible!

“H-Hang on, wait a minute,” Morger instructs Loona as he finally caught his breath; “Once that bouncer’s out, we’ll be able to go inside. We just gotta be patient for a little longer, yeah?”

“Got it.. got it,” Loona replied to signal that she understood; “Do you think he’ll squeal?”

The accompanying male hellhound let off a shrug; “If we coax him enough, yeah; I think he will.”

Just as Morger finished speaking, the same bouncer from before swung the door open to allow himself back outside before closing it behind him; “He’s all ready for ya, Morg’. Once you two are done, let either of us know and we’ll deal with… whatever mess you two make of ‘im.”

“Thanks for doing that for us, man. I appreciate it,” Morger says before handing him a fistful of cash; “Here’s that money I owe ya.”

With a satisfied smirk spread across his muzzle, the hellhound bouncer accepts the cash before quietly making his way back towards the front of the building without another word. With the bouncer now out of the way, the long awaited opportunity to interrogate this ‘Francis Taylor’ was now literally just a door away. Loona and Morger both make eye contact, nodding once to each other to confirm that they were ready respectively. It was Loona who led the way into the backroom of the nightclub, carefully opening the door and peering inside with much anticipation of what was to come.

Luckily for the pair of hellhounds, the backroom itself was sufficiently illuminated with a long high-powered fluorescent bulb which lit up every corner. The room itself appeared to be a storage room with miscellaneous equipment such as electrical wire and ladders stored haphazardly within the shelves. Placed in the center of this spacious room was a chair, and lo and behold, bound within the aforementioned chair with some rope around his arms and legs was their target - their captive for the evening.

To describe the marsupial-looking specimen before them as anything other than “sickening” and “unpleasant” would be an understatement. The sinner’s off-color brown and gray hair covered him head-to-toe, with large matted patches being a testament to just how poorly he maintained himself, if at all. Another testament to the sinner’s poor hygiene habits had to be the faint yet foul odor which also radiated off of him, the smell in question similar to that produced by roadkill. It was

also clearly apparent to Loona that her captive was most definitely a marsupial of some type, but whether he was anything from a decaying possum to a diseased rat was certainly up for debate. Adding to his whole outward disheveled appearance, the sinner on this occasion wore a slightly dirtied white sleeveless shirt and a pair of torn trousers, all complete with a pair of evidently worn shoes which were threatening to fall apart.

The captive's face certainly didn't help his case either, with a scowl which appeared to sit almost permanently within his brow and a look of pure murder in his red and off-yellow eyes. Peeking out of his crooked, hideous mouth within his long snout were a pair of yellowed fangs, as well as a few sharpened molars poking throughout his sneering mouth, which did nothing but contribute to his unapproachable appearance. Loona couldn't help but notice that the sinner's right eye appeared to have been badly bruised, an injury that hadn't been there before he was unwillingly dragged away for interrogation; it was safe to say that the bouncer from before decided that it was best to 'rough him up a little'.

As the sinner struggled desperately within his seat, he began spitting vile threats against his captors; "NGAHH! NNGH- Fuck! Y-You're a pair of mangy fucken dogs!! I'll slit both of ya's throats, I will!!"

Loona couldn't help but let out a boisterous yet mocking laugh, finding hilarity in his desperate struggle within his bounds; "Ohh, I'd LOVE to see you try, you filthy bastard!"

The captive sinner continued snarling viciously, staring up towards the looming figure; "The fuck do ya want from me, you bitch?!"

Loona took this as an opportunity to begin asking questions, starting with the most important; "Are you Francis Tyler?"

The sinner scowled even harder; "Why?! Who's aski-… Oh wait.. WAIT! I remember your face, ya mutt! You're that receptionist, arentcha? F-From that one company??"

"The one and only," Loona gladly admits with a wide and menacing smirk; "But I'm the one asking questions here, so you better shut the fuck up and listen before I do it for you!"

"Oh-hohohooo! Look atcha! All tough and confident with yaself," the sinner openly mocks the female hellhound; "Ya wouldn't be so confident if this was a fair fi-"

THWACK!

"*ACK!* FUCKIN- *RAAAGH*!!"

The sinner was abruptly shut down after receiving a forceful backhand to the face from Loona, who was quickly growing impatient with her captive's demeanor!

Loona began growling loudly as her agitation grew louder; "You better start speaking, you rotten little shitkicker, before I carve you a new hole right in your neck! I'll ask again; ARE YOU, or ARE YOU NOT Francis Fucking Tyler?!"

"*GAH*- Alright, alright! Yes!! I'm Francis Tyler, that's me!" Francis finally capitulates, having since cracked under the pressure in addition to his ears ringing from the slap he had just received moments ago!

A menacing grin formed upon Loona's muzzle, the hellhound now somewhat convinced that Francis was now beginning to cooperate with her; "Good! See? That wasn't so hard to answer, now was it?? I wanna ask you a few questions, Francis. Or, wait, should I start calling you Frankie?"

"Don't you FUCKEN DARE call me that, ya bitch!!"

"Or what, Frankie?! Whatcha gonna do about it, huh?!"

In what was perhaps a smart decision to the captive sinner's credit, he decided that any form of further vocal protestations was futile and would ultimately make his position that much worse. The only answer that Loona received to her somewhat rhetorical question was a death-glare and a low hiss like that of an angry serpent sulking in his own humility. A demeaning snicker left Loona's mouth as she proceeded with the pressing questions which she had planned out within her head.

"That's much better, Francis," Loona smirks; "So much better. Let's start this, shall we? … Were you in a gang with Victor Malloy?"

The sudden, unexpected mention of Malloy certainly wasn't lost on Francis who's tough facade began to weaken ever-so-slightly and turn into one of momentary apprehension; "M-Malloy? Hah-I-Is that what this is about? Victor Fucking Malloy? That rotten bastard?? That putrid freak?! … He-.. H-He's not here, is he??"

"No. He isn't," Loona was quick to assure; "But he's the reason why your sorry self is tied up in this chair. Now listen good; I want you to tell me everything about him, and I mean everything."

Francis let out another yet weaker snarl; "Why?! Why does he interest you so much? W-What's there to know??"

Loona took this question as an opportunity to forward the interrogation before time ran out; "First off all, you answer my first question. Were you, or were you not, in a gang with Victor Malloy?"

This repeat of Loona's first question managed to snap Francis into submission; "Ya really wanna know, mutt? Yes! Yes I was, for fifteen years! Let me ask ya somethin' again, ay? Why do ya care so much about.. A-about him??"

"There's a friend of mine," Loona begins to explain albeit begrudgingly; "As we speak, he's being hunted down by Malloy. He's also after my neck because I'm standing in the way of what he wants, and I'm going to be the one to beat his disheveled face to a pulp. There's a lot of things that I don't know about Malloy, and you're going to tell me what those unknowns are TONIGHT!"

The captive fell into a short burst of almost maniacal cackling; "*HAHAAAAAAA*!! Ohh, that's a riot, lady, that really is!! As if ya going to beat the boss-man! Trust me woman, I've tried it before - it's hopeless! Ya fightin' a lost battle!"

"'The Boss-man'? He was your boss?" This passing description given to Malloy seemed to intrigue Loona somewhat.

"Aye, he was!" Francis quickly confirms; "But he was a very secretive man, and we were all terrified of him! I-I still am!"

"Okay, we're getting off track here," the interrogator was quick to interrupt her captive's thought process; "Start squealing about him, right now."

“Woman, listen tah me, and read me lips - I don’t know that much-”

THWACK! THWACK!

“You’re a LIAR!!” Loona snarled angrily as she punched Francis across the face twice-fold, causing the sinner to wail out in ear-splitting agony!

“NNNGAH, FUCK-!! STOP-STOP-STOP, I’m not fucken lying!! J-Just hear me out, yeah?!!”

A deep and guttural snarl emanated from Loona as she glared with great ferocity at her hostage; “Go on, then! Speak!!”

“*OKAY*,” Francis bellowed out desperately in groveling submission; “Okay, I will! As I said; Victah and the higher-ups were all very secretive-”

“Woah woah, slow the fuck down!” The hellhound interrogator was hasty to interrupt; “Start from the beginning, from the top! I want to know *EVERYTHING*.”

It appeared that Francis gave himself a split second to ponder about what exactly “everything” meant, his eyes twitching as he glared upwards towards the towering female hellhound before him. After much anticipation, and letting out a brief nervous exhale to calm himself down, Francis began to explain “Everything”.

“Okay. This.. T-This is everything I know, I swear on me ma! … F-Fuh fifteen years, I was in a gang operatin’ around Eastern ‘Austraya, as ya already know by now. We were known was the “*Dead Men Walkin”*”. When I joined ‘em around Two-Thousand-N’-Eight, they’d been around fuh about fifteen years. Pretty sure they were all ex-Painters and Dockers Union blokes, and were involved with their intimidatin’ tactics until the Union dissolved in and around Nineteen-Ninety-Three.”

“The “‘*Dead Men Walkin”*” was split into two hierarchies - “The Higher-Ups”, which Malloy was, and “The Scrubbers”; I was only a Scrubbah. Now, how it worked was that “The Higher-Ups” would plan our hits and our jobs fuh the week, and that would be passed down to “The Scrubbers.”

We Scrubbahs did all kindza shit - theft, drug-smugglin', intimidatin', hits against certain blokes; everythin'! There was also a strict code of secrecy which us Scrubbahs were told to never break unless we wanted a death-wish. That code was this; we were nevah - I repeat, *NEVAH* - permitted to know where The Higher-Ups did their plannin' or what happened behind the scenes. We nevah knew!"

"Ya see, that's what I personally don't know. What I do know is that Victah Malloy.. H-he scared all of us. I'm pretty damn sure that there was some dark magic shit that bastard was playin' with. But that was only a rumor!"

"What makes you think he did that?" Loona inquires, though she already knew that the aforementioned "*rumour*" was indeed fact.

"There was always somethin' off about him," Francis explains with a nervousness in the way he held his voice; "He was always secretive, almost reserved to a point. Whenevah he went on jobs where we had to kill certain blokes, he'd always tag along wit' us. Soon as the job was done, Victah would send us all home, and he'd stay behind wit' the corpse. Had a mate of mine in the gang who told me in secret that aftah one job, he hid to see what Victah did wit' the body. He said that Victah took the body, dumped it at the back of his car, and then… s-slit his throat in a weird way wit' this weird daggah me mate had never seen before. Aftuh that, Victah jumped in the drivah's seat and drove off wit' the body, presumably to dump it in some creek. But again, don't take me mate's word for it; he was always a bit up with the fairies, always prone to paranoia hallucinations. But… but it stuck wit' me, what he said he saw, for whatevah reason."

Loona stares at her captive intently, her brow furrowed while she tried to process everything that Francis was revealing. Suddenly, another question appeared within her mind; "Hold on a minute. You said that you've tried to fight him before? What do you mean by that, as in physical fighting?"

"Nah. It weren't physical. It was verbal at first," Francis solemnly explained, glaring right into Loona's eyes as he spoke; "I don't dare tell what happened that day, but know this; it ended with me dead. That's why I'm down here in the fucken first place. Fuck knows what that evil bastard did with me body… and I don't think I wanna know."

For a few seconds, Loona stood silently in deep thought, trying to fully process what Francis had revealed to her to the best of his apparent ability. The female hellhound turned her head to her left, her eyes meeting up with Morger's own who looked right back at her and shrugged his shoulders. This silent gaze was maintained until their captive spoke again.

“Listen, lady. If you’re really goin’ aftah Malloy, I-I can give you a name of a bloke I’m sure has much more insight to Malloy than I do.”

This revelation caught Loona’s immediate attention, resulting in her looking back towards the sinner bound in the chair; “Yeah? Go on then, spit it out.”

“… Jack Foster. His name’s Jack Foster. H-He was that bit closah with the Higher-Ups, so I’m sure he’ll be able to tell ya a bit more,” Francis explains to great length; “Hey! M-Maybe I can help ya’s!”

Loona couldn’t help but scoff at the idea; “Pfuh! Help me? And why would I need your help, huh??”

“B-Because I know where he could be! Ya have to trust me on this one-”

“HAH,” Loona callously replies with a belittling demeanor towards the rodent-like sinner; “That’s fucking rich coming from-”

“Just a minute, Loona,” Morger decides to step in, interrupting Loona’s thought process; “Maybe he can help you. Where’d you say you can find him, Francis?”

“I-I’m not sure of that yet,” Francis wheezes as he let out a periodic cough; “But I’ll tell ya what, lady; I’ll find him, and when I do, I’ll call ya through the company phone, yeah? A-And hey! If I go back on my word, you have my permission to track me down and kill me, aye??”

Although Loona knew that she certainly would need help to track down this “Jack Foster”, she was nonetheless very hesitant to trust someone that was currently strapped to a chair with a black eye, let alone a sinner at that. Despite her deep-seated reservations about relying on the diseased rat-looking sinner before her, ultimately Loona knew that she didn’t have much of a choice.

With a guttural, strained sigh, Loona delivered her verdict; “Fine. Do that. But I swear, if you betray what little trust I have in you, I *WILL* turn you into a rodent casserole. … I think we’re done here.”

After a brief exchange of looks, both Loona and Morger recognised that not much else needed to be done with this ‘Francis Tyler’. All that they knew was that they had a possible new informant who would assist Loona in her search for answers. Whether or not he would be of much reliable help or if he would keep to his roughly-planned promise was definitely up for debate. With one final nod, both hellhounds begin leaving the backroom to inform the bouncers around the front that they were done with their captive.

Just before Loona could step through the doorway, a thought question appeared within her mind which she felt compelled to ask the sinner. With a furrowed brow, Loona pivots around to face Francis before speaking; “Hey. What made you order the hit on Malloy?”

An almost somber look within Francis’ off-colored eyes began to form before he answered; “I really don’t know, lady. My conscience, I s’pose?”

Loona took a moment to stare intently at Francis, unsure of what to make of his admittance. All that she hoped for was a conclusion to the fast-developing and complicated situation at hand, and if this wretched sinner bound before her was her only hope to find that answer, then that’s where her hope would be placed - at least for now. With an exhausted drawn-out exhale, Loona at last exited the room and back towards the company van parked across the road.

“Antonov's taking a while, isn’t he?”

“He won’t be long, give him a minute. I’m pretty sure he knows what he’s doing. Seems professional enough, at least.”

“Ya sure of that, Trev’?”

“He’s our last-ditch effort to try and find Mr. Steele, Clyde, I don’t think we have much choice.”

“Argh- maybe you’re right. Did he find anything yesterday back at the crime scene?”

“I don’t know, he didn’t say much. All he did was potter about the place, look at the markers on the floor and some other shit around the house. He’s reserved but efficient enough, at least from what I can tell by first impressions.”

“Always the quiet ones you have to watch, innit?”

“Too right-”

“Apologies for long delay, gentlemen.”

“Oh, Mr. Antonov! Perfect timing, sir.”

“Indeed. Shall we start briefing at once if all are ready?”

“Ready when you are.”

“Mm. Understood. … Gentlemen, I am afraid that this particular case has interested me to great length for reason which I shall explain towards end of briefing. I would like to thank you, Mr. Trevor Pearson, for allowing me access to crime scene. As we know, alleged crime and disappearance occurred between 1700 to 1800 hours roughly forty-eight hours ago to date. The most prominent features of crime scene include patches of blood found on floor, broken television screen, bullet casings, and shattered lock on door which signifies break-in. Currently, majority of evidence indicates two possible scenarios - Mr. Steele was either shot, kidnapped and still alive, or was shot, left to bleed out, died at scene, then assailants retrieved body for unspecified reasons.”

“Right.”

“But fear not, gentlemen, for I am optimist; There is a high possibility that Mr. Steele is still alive as no indications of fatal bleeding were found at crime scene. I must, however, note what has caught my attention in this particular case. Upon entering into house, dirt tracks of large Canine-type paw prints are clearly evident on floor leading towards crime scene itself. As measured, they are roughly the size of my own shoes in measurement, signifying that whatever canine created such tracks is abnormally large.”

“What are you implying? That we’re dealing with a fucken.. werewolf or something like that? I don’t see how paw prints from some large mangy animal is relevant to the crime, Mr. Antonov-”

“I thoroughly examine all evidence, Mr. Clyde Barnes, whether relevant or not. Whether you interpret it as relevant to crime or not is entirely up to you, I am only noting my observations.”

“Got it.”

“I have also created recommendations for further action which considers all evidence presented, which I shall provide to you gentlemen now. From what I have thoroughly analyzed and considered in relation to disappearance of Mr. Steele, and from the possible scenarios to which I have read out, I recommend that a search and rescue operation is planned and conducted as soon as possible if we desire a positive conclusion.”

“Righto. What do you reckon, Trevor? You call the shots.”

“Well… if that’s the recommendation, Mr. Antonov, then I’m afraid that’s what we must do.”

“Indeed it is, Mr. Pearson.”

Of Bleakness and Temptations

To describe the eerily silent and lonesome drive back home to the apartment as anything remotely opposite of “awfully tedious” would be a blatant lie. After having since driven Morger back to his place of residence out of gratitude for his assistance - an apartment near the outskirts of Imp City - Loona now faced a wearying thirty-minute drive back to her own respective apartment. Although the actual distance between Morger’s residence and her own wasn’t too much of a trip in the grand scheme of things, the necessity of having to navigate through city streets and countless turns to arrive at her destination is what increased the drive-time by a considerable margin. What needlessly complicated the return trip, especially at this time in the evening, was having to watch out for the odd intoxicated pedestrian who would stumble onto the road ahead, the probability of such a thing occurring only increasing as the night progressed.

Loona let out a slow, slightly fatigued exhale as she drove along, using her free right hand to grab hold of an energy drink, which had been gifted to her by none other than Morger before they parted their separate ways. The hellhound’s indifferent eyes glared blankly at the road ahead as her mind began trailing off into an amalgamation of varying thoughts and personal queries, especially of that relating to the interrogation which had occurred just the hour prior. One potent thought which stood out in Loona’s mind with regards to the interrogation of ‘Francis Tyler’ was how so much yet so little was gained; of course, she had found out more about who Victor Malloy was in life and the revelations about his suspected use of “black magic”, she still wasn’t any closer as to figuring out how exactly she would counter the threat produced by the sinner, let alone where to find the “source of the madness” as told to her by the “Sub-Guardian”, Gunther. One particular thought that stood out prominently within Loona’s mind was the nagging, doubtful notion surrounding her former captive’s reliability, whether or not he would follow up with his “promise” to find this “Jack Foster” he spoke of. Regardless of her personal reservations about Francis’ reliability, Loona figured that the only feasible option for the moment was to give the sinner the benefit of the doubt.

After much driving, Loona had at last arrived in front of the apartment block to which she lived. A most welcome feeling of long-awaited relief emerged when she realized the drive was finally over, overtaking any other thoughts she had prior to her arrival. Using the remnants of whatever attentiveness she had after her full day, Loona managed to park the car in its designated spot before at long last getting out with a tired heave and an exhausted yawn. After making absolutely sure that the company van was locked for the night, Loona began walking in an almost tired waltzing fashion through the entrance of the apartment building, just about ready to call it a day and immerse herself within the sanctuary of her bedroom.

It was only when the lone hellhound finally reached the elevator did this yearning for relaxation turn into a feeling of oddly-placed apprehension, the feeling of which sent a shiver right through her body like a shock of static electricity…

Despite this sudden unnerving feeling, Loona almost immediately chalked it up to her anxious, fatigued mind developing a form of irrational paranoia from having to think constantly about the threats she faced; after all, it hadn't been a very smooth-sailing twenty-four hours with so much developing over a very short period of time. Regardless of her conclusion surrounding the resurgent unsettling feeling, Loona decided to verge on the side of caution by checking her surroundings intently, all the while waiting for the elevator to arrive. Luckily for her, the elevator didn't take that much longer to finish descending, the dull singular tone which signaled its arrival echoing throughout the room. Not long after the resounding tone, the metallic doors of the elevator rolled open with a rumble to reveal the interior of the elevator itself welcoming her with open arms, like a sanctuary away from the outside world. Loona steps into the elevator car while immersed in complete silence, the only sound accompanying her being the faint buzzing of the elevator's fluorescent lighting.

Loona pivots herself around within the elevator car to look back down towards the apartment block's entrance, her peering, almost stabbing scarlet-red eyes analyzing the shadowy scene before her, the darkness of the night veiling everything it touched like a shroud. What was in reality a mere few seconds of glancing into the lobby felt more like a drawn-out eternity, an almost childlike fear of the dark beginning to manifest itself within Loona's exhausted mind. In an almost defensive move, Loona let out a faint growling snarl, complete with a menacing sneer to intimidate any possible threat which could be just out of sight. While doing this, the lone hellhound finally jabbed the button for her floor, feeling a sense of relief as she watched the sliding doors close between her and that oddly foreboding lobby.

It didn't take too long for the elevator to arrive on Loona's floor, the ascending room slowing to a complete stop before the singular, almost depressing bell-tone signaled the end of the unremarkable and short upward journey. As they had done countless times prior, the pair of sliding doors noisily parted ways to reveal the all-too familiar hallway which lay before the elevator's lone passenger, the aging luminescent bulbs embedded within the ceiling giving off a warm-yellowish light which casted long outreaching shadows. Loona wasted no time at all in committing to the final few paces of the journey home, strutting sluggishly down the hallway towards the leftmost door which was located halfway down the slightly dingy and bland hallway.

The keychain which Loona held within her hands clattered lightly together as she fumbled with it, managing to find the apartment key before slotting it into the lock and turning it clockwise. The turning of the lock produced a blunt metallic sound which announced that Loona's journey back home was finally over to her utmost relief, the hellhound then pushing the door inwards to allow herself in. To her honest surprise, instead of some form of acute pandemonium which a pessimistic side of her expected within the back of her mind, she was met with quiet tranquility.

Leaning against the wall with her arms folded and a tired look of her own was Millie, who was staring off into space with a bland indifference about her. Sitting on the couch with his back facing both Loona and Millie was Blitz, who appeared to be sitting awkwardly upright in a stiff position.

As soon as the front door opened to reveal the familiar hellhound, Millie turned her head rightward, giving Loona a nod in acknowledgement of her presence; “Evenin’.”

“Hey,” Loona quietly replied while her eyes examined the scene before her; “So yeah, I’m back.”

Millie nodded her head once more; “M’kay. How’d it go?”

The hellhound let off a brief shrug of her shoulders; “As well as it could, I guess. It’s oddly quiet here, what’s going on?”

Please don’t be something bad, please don’t be something bad, please don’t be—

“The human and Blitz had a fight.”

For fuck sakes…

This development caused Loona to let out a low groan in utter irritation as she pinched her brow with the tips of her fingers; “You’re kidding me? About what??”

Millie weakly threw her hands up in the air to show her ignorance to the cause; “I haven’t the faintest idea. I was in the kitchen gettin’ myself something. I turned my head away for a few seconds, and all wrath broke loose! There wasn’t any physical stuff, jus’ a lotta name-callin’ and crap. I stepped in after Blitz said something, well… not very nice, let’s just say that.”

The revelation of Blitz’s mysterious “not very nice” comment certainly wasn’t lost on Loona, a look of vexed confusion beginning to form on her face; “Excuse me, what? Millie.. what does “not very nice” mean?”

“I’d rather not repeat it,” Millie admits; “It’s best you leave it alone for tonight as well. I already had to practically scream at them to separate, gave them both a stern scoldin’.”

Loona nods her head as her irritation of the apparent aftermath simmered; “Right. And where’s Jim exactly?”

Millie extends her left hand towards Loona’s bedroom door; “In your room.”

“Got it. Thanks for doing this for me, Millie,” Loona quietly expresses her gratitude, watching as Millie gives a brief nod back before heading to the front door. Her coworker says a final, quiet “goodnight” before leaving and shutting the door behind her.

At long last, Loona was left alone in the now eerie silence of the apartment, only being able to begrudgingly imagine what levels of fiery abuse had been exchanged between her father and the young man who knows how long ago. With the nagging desire to confine herself to her room, Loona decided that it was best to call it a day after much anticipation, heading towards her bedroom but not before taking a detour to glare at Blitz still slumped in the couch. It appeared that Blitz appeared tight-lipped yet still disgruntled, evidently still fuming over the fabled verbal altercation that he had with Jim; the same altercation which he said something “not very nice” according to Millie.

The imp’s eyes glance up at Loona who was looking down upon him. He let out an irritated, rough exhale before speaking; “What?”

The observant hellhound gave her father a piercing look of judgment, a defeated guttural sigh escaping her lips as she made a beeline straight to her room, opening the door before entering inside. In a move to prove her annoyance, Loona roughly shut her bedroom door which caused it to close with a reverberating “SLAM!”, causing the room to vibrate a little!

A sharp breath in fright made Loona realize that Jim, too, was within her room, sitting by the foot of her bed in much the same awkward upright position that Blitz was. This factor caused Loona to snap out of her careless anger, allowing herself to regather her utmost composure before speaking.

“W-What the hell happened while I was gone??” Loona inquired in an almost baffled tone of voice, though she wasn’t all too surprised that this had occurred.

“Ask your old man,” Jim mumbled in a gruff tone, evidently in a foul mood; “He started it, that prick.”

Loona stuttered in a baffled way before finding her words; “Over what exactly??”

“The rights to the couch,” Jim bluntly explained, raising his head to face Loona standing in front of the door; “I went to sit down because I was tired and wanted to rest. He comes over screaming about how he wants to sleep ‘cause he’s got a searing headache and whatever-the-fuck, and he wanted me off, simple as that! I told him “fuck off”, and that got him going. It devolved into a shouting match and eventually Millie went and screamed at us to break it up. I gotta say though; she terrifies me.”

A half-hearted snicker escaped Loona’s mouth in reaction to Jim’s comment regarding her coworker; “I getcha. She terrifies the fuck outta me as well. But wait, she said Blitz said something “not very nice” to you. What does that mean, what did he say to you?”

Even more concerned suspicion arose within Loona when she noticed that her tenant was quite obviously hesitant to give rest to her curiosity. A vacant and almost dissociative look manifested upon the young man’s face as he began staring off into nothingness, his eyes holding a clearly evident pensive desolation within them which told Loona a thousand words of what must’ve occurred. However, the hellhound’s curiosity couldn’t be remedied with mere looks; she sought for a clear and concise answer.

“Jim? … Jim. ... Dude, look at me.”

The young man’s head turns slightly towards the present hellhound, his hesitant and weary gaze holding that same gloomy look as he stared at her.

In a bid to find out the truth as to what had been spoken, Loona softened her outward appearance by relaxing her posture and expression, all the while maintaining that same well-meaning firmness within her eyes; “What did he say?”

“... Starting to think your old man’s right, Loona.”

A scoff erupted suddenly from Loona in reaction to the notion which was so incredibly daft to her; “Pfuh! Come on, when’s that idiot ever right about anything? Right about what exactly?”

“This whole thing that we’re tryna hold off against? We’re just delaying the inevitable,” Jim said in a blunt and dreary tone; “I’m a liability to you; a hindrance. A disaster waiting to happen, if you will. Malloy’s gonna get me, Loona, whether we like it or not. Face it; it’s hopeless. I’m hopeless. It’s probably best if you free yourself from my fate and… live your life.”

Hearing the explanation as to what the human heavily implied was said to him only served to make Loona’s blood boil hotter than it ever had that evening, though she managed to confine this acquired searing rage to herself, at least for the moment - not only for her sanity’s sake, but for Jim’s as well.

“He said all that to you, did he?” Loona asks in a hushed tone, her infuriation clearly evident within her eyes and the way she exhaled shakily.

The certain confirmatory nod that Jim provided as his answer only served to anger Loona further, her patience with her father almost completely diminished.

“Can I be honest with ya?” Jim asks somberly, his voice reduced to a hushed monotone.

Loona nods her head once, her face occupied with a look of stern compassion; “Sure.”

“... I feel empty. I can’t feel anything any longer. … It sounds really childish for a grown man like myself to say that, I know, but… I just-… There isn’t that much fight within me anymore. I feel alone; not in the physical sense, but my state of mind.”

“H-Hold on for just a second. Can I say something?” The hellhound tries to interrupt Jim’s monologue, wanting to interject something she felt needed to be said.

Unfortunately in spite of her initial efforts to snap him out of this most depressive episode, it seemed apparent that Jim was too far gone in his disassociation, seeming to ignore his pseudo-roommate’s request.

“Maybe I deserve this..? … That this was all meant to be..? … Just another forsaken hindrance upon everyone else’s life like a horrendous blemish..”

“Okay, now you’re going too far there. Can I just—“

“It’s not like I’m anything of note either way.”

“Hey.”

“I’ll be forgotten, not to worry.”

“Hey!”

“There isn’t much to fight for anymore. … I’m a simple lost—”

“Fuck sakes, you’re impossible!”

Yank!

“Wh—?!”

The human abruptly snaps out of his dissociative ramblings when he feels a set of firm hands grab him by both of his shoulders, before then forcefully pulling his entire upper body with a sudden lurch to his left! Before he even realized what exactly was occurring, he felt the left-half of his face collide with something furry and somewhat wiry. It took Jim a moment to realize what exactly was happening, but when he at last figured it out, he almost couldn’t believe it.

He was in the midst of an embrace — a hug.

It was obvious who was performing such an unexpected gesture as Loona’s voice rang out in his ear; “STOP! Just stop it! Quit it with that stupid talk, okay?! That’s bullshit — You’re speaking complete bullshit!”

Jim was left completely and utter speechless, trying to comprehend exactly what Loona was doing; “Loona, what are you—”

“What’s it look like, dumbass?? Be quiet and accept it!” Loona growls as she maintains the firm embrace almost desperately!

The young man almost couldn’t begin to fathom what exactly was happening; a gesture which was deemed practically next to impossible for the hellhound to ever act upon, let alone even consider, was taking place. Although he certainly felt the firm, oddly comforting embrace which Loona held him in with almost brutish strength, it almost felt like a complete and utter hallucination. In any other normal circumstance, if there was any normality surrounding this entire situation to begin with, it would be a completely preposterous and daft concept for this reclusive and surly hellhound to be embracing anybody, let alone some mere, dumb, moping human for that matter!

Regardless of the sheer improbability of the gesture from none other than Loona, she firmly maintained the hug without compromise, all the while trying her hardest to hide how uncomfortable she was with the action she practically forced herself to take. Loona wasn’t entirely sure as to why she had decided to perform such an unthinkable action; was it out of pity? Out of compassion? Perhaps out of a desire to silence the human’s irritating ramblings? The hellhound wasn’t sure at all, yet one word stood out within her mind as she steadfastly maintained her hold:

“Support”.

The hellhound’s ears perked up when she heard Jim’s speak weakly, his voice beginning to crack.

“S-Sorry, Loona, I- … I’m sorry. I-I’m so sorry,” the young man meekly apologized as Loona began to feel him tremble within her clutches, as well as feeling his weakened arms give her a hug in return; “Dammit, I’m such a wuss…”

“Hey-hey! Listen to me. None of this “sorry” crap, yeah? There’s nothing to be sorry for.” Loona firmly yet gently assures, her voice softened to just above a hushed whisper; “You’re not a damn “wuss” either, so quit saying it.”

“Right… r-right. W-Whatever you say..,” the bleak human submits, practically choking out his reply through strained, sharp breaths through each syllable, trying his absolute hardest to prevent himself from dissolving into a complete weeping mess.

A short yet notable period of somber tranquility was shared between both Loona and Jim as there was nothing much else to say which immediately came to mind. Although the gloomy consensus within the room was definitely understood by both parties, the same couldn't necessarily be said in regards to their individual thoughts. In Jim's case, his mind was effectively vacant and void of any thoughts at all, with dreadful feelings of despair and pessimism occupying the space where words and decisions would usually form — A pitiful, almost pathetic husk of the man he usually was.

In direct contrast to the human's state of mind, Loona's case could certainly be described as a polar opposite. The embracing hellhound's thoughts were full of emotions such as Sympathy, and Pity, yet at the same time were accompanied by opposing, uncertain feelings such as Confliction, and Dubiety. To elaborate, her Sympathy and Pity was on full display physically through her continuing warm embrace; an unusually, almost uncharacteristically kind gesture which Loona hadn't done much of in her entire life, especially one which she was acting upon willfully. In spite of this merciful gesture, Loona's mind was filled with conflicting thoughts; Why was she doing this? She almost always despised intimate contact such as hugs, especially from Blitz, so why was she so willfully hugging this mere human? And why did it feel so… correct? So right, considering the circumstances? Was she… going soft? Perhaps the elderly "Sub-Guardian" who visited her through her dreams was right; Maybe she did have a sense of Empathy and Righteousness which she never knew she had. Compassion, though? That was debatable.

After a period of almost deafening silence, it was gently broken when Loona cleared her throat before loosening her embrace, allowing for Jim to pull away slightly out of the hellhound's tight grip.

"Now look at me," Loona bluntly orders, one hand firmly grabbing the young man's left shoulder while she uses her opposite hand to point two fingers towards her eyes.

Jim meekly obliges to Loona's request, looking directly at her face which held an expression of caring firmness.

"Are you listening? Okay," Loona asked before continuing; "You are not to listen to anything Blitz has to say. That's your first mistake; even listening to that asshole in the first place! I couldn't give less of a damn who started it and over what, he is NOT to speak to you in that way."

The young man with a continuous somber look in his uncertain eyes began to express his doubts; "But what if he's—"

Loona was quick to immediately shut down Jim, clicking her fingers loudly in front of his face; “AH—! Be quiet! I don’t wanna hear you depreciating yourself anymore, capiche? Blitz can be a liar and a complete prick to people - whatever he’s stuck in your head is a lie. Okay? Just a complete, bullshit lie. … Understood?”

Jim nodded in thorough compliance.

A soft exhale left Loona’s mouth in an effort to calm herself down from the furious internal reaction she had upon hearing the news; “Aight. … Are you good?”

“Somewhat? I don’t know. I’ll persevere, I have to,” Jim answers truthfully, a somber look still sitting stubbornly within his emotionally tired eyes.

“Hm. … Want a drink?”

“… Please?”

The hellhound got up from the side of her bed and made her way a few paces across her bedroom towards the mini fridge. The fridge door opens with a slight rattle of the living world beer bottles, proceeding to grab a pair of her personal favorite brand. After gently kicking the door closed, Loona returned back towards the side of the bed where Jim sat drearily, though he did seem somewhat better yet still pensive. The hellhound gently taps Jim’s forearm with one of the glass bottles as an offering - an offer that wasn’t lost on Jim as he carefully took the chilled glass container out of her hand.

Maintaining her attentiveness, Loona watches on as the young man loosely holds the beer bottle in his weakened grip, observing as he takes a brief swig, acquiring himself a mouthful of the almost blissful alcohol. In turn, Loona took a swig of her own beverage, savoring the taste as she engulfed the velvety liquid. The hellhound began to savor the silence which had well and truly settled within the room, the lack of noise acting as a remedy from the stresses of the day; a form of refuge against the tension which weighed down upon her in an almost oppressive manner. Loona took a brief moment to hold the alcohol in her mouth before swallowing, her eyes beginning to stare off into space to alleviate both the physical and mental fatigue which was threatening to worsen.

Her moment of glaring off into nothingness was interrupted when she heard a suppressed wheezing chuckle off to her left; Jim was laughing.

Loona cocks her head towards the young man in slight confusion; “What’s so funny?”

This question only served to provoke more wheezing chuckling, before Jim shook his head weakly and turned to his left to face Loona; “I-I mean, look at this, matey - look at me! I’m a mess. Not only that, I need some… wolf-thing to keep me company in this bizarre.. katabasis that I’m in.”

“Kata-what now?” Loona inquires, oddly intrigued by the word which was completely alien to her.

“Katabasis,” Jim corrects; “In other words… a journey to the underworld. There’s also an opposite word that describes when you were stuck on Earth; Anabasis.”

So many foreign, discombobulating words in so little time - it was enough to paralyze Loona as her mind tried to process these strange additions to her vocabulary; “And you got these words from where exactly?”

“Not sure. Guess I’ve just always known they exist,” Jim admits with a weak smirk; “You do much reading?”

Loona scoffed at the question; “Me? Hah! Fuck no, why would I do that?”

“Yeah, true. Argh, I should’ve known you don’t.”

“The hell’s that supposed to mean??” The hellhound couldn’t help but feel surprised by the remark.

“What? You said it, not me,” the young man quipped back, signaling to Loona that his mood had somewhat improved.

“Wow. Just wow, look at you! Didn’t know you had an asshole bone in your body,” Loona commented with a teasing smirk before taking another swig of her beverage.

An ever wider grin broke through the young man's face; "It takes one to know one, hey?"

This comment wasn't lost on Loona who decided to give her tenant a nudge in the shoulder, in what was an almost lighthearted reprimand. A brief clear of her throat signaled the end of more light-hearted spirits and a shift back towards the more pressing matters.

"Are you feeling any better? Don't you dare lie to me either."

"Honestly? … I'm not so sure yet. Maybe a bit?"

Loona broke out a smile; "You wanna know something? I can relate to that, not knowing how you're doing sometimes. Do what I do; struggle on. But don't struggle too much."

"… You know what, Loona? That's probably the smartest thing you've ever said," Jim decides to comment, somewhat impressed by Loona's slither of advice.

The hellhound scoffed; "You think so, huh?"

"In all honesty, yeah! It's a solid bit of advice. Thank you."

"Don't mention it," Loona quietly and quickly replies, taking another sip of her alcoholic beverage before setting it on her nightstand and letting out a yawn; "Ah-nngh! Uff- I'm ready to call it a day. What about you?"

"Probably a good idea," Jim agrees with the sentiment as he lifted himself off of the bed with a tired heave. With a light stagger to his step, the human shuffled over towards the dull mattress he had been relegated to for the past two nights, now going onto his third.

Loona cracked her knuckles out of an odd exhaustive boredom as she climbed into bed, throwing open the sheets so she could slither comfortably underneath them. Another more exhaustive, whiny dog-like yawn escaped the dozy hellhound's mouth as her eyes began to strain, a potent sign that the beginning of a deep sleep was almost upon her. The final decision that Loona made for the day was to comply with her body's tempting desire for a full night's rest, shifting underneath her covers

and allowing for her individual muscles to unwind. Once more like every other evening, Loona would now receive the mesmerizing comfort provided by disassociating from her surroundings through the form of much needed rest…

…Or so she thought.

"Loona? ...Loona mate. ... Oi."

Loona let out a low exhausted grunt, answering the hushed call; "Oh my fucking- what. What is it?"

"Ya still awake?"

"Nooo I'm not. You're hallucinating my voice. I'm actually fast asleep," Loona answers in a heavily sarcastic way; "Whatcha want?"

"Not sure if I should say this, but-"

"Then you shouldn't. Goodnight."

"But hang on, can I say it please?" Jim interrupts right back.

A gruff, inconvenienced exhale emanated from Loona, giving her tenant a short startle; "I don't have much choice, do I. I'd say no, but… you know what? Fine. Say it. But make it quick, I'm not in the mood."

"... You confuse me."

"… Excuse me?"

Loona hadn't heard such a notion about herself before. On most occasions, especially from Millie or Moxxie, it would always be about how lazy or useless she was as a receptionist, or how insufferable and uncooperative she was. An asshole; a bitch; good-for-nothing; she had been called it all before. But confusing? Not so much, to say the least. So much so, that the very idea of herself "confusing" somebody made her stagnate from her sleep, her eyes fluttering open as she sat up in bed, oddly invested in what Jim had to say.

"Confusing how? What are you saying, that I'm difficult?" Loona asks, a hint of suspicion and intrigue manifesting within her.

Jim shook his head as he stared up towards the ceiling, his hands resting behind his head; "I wouldn't say difficult, just that you're confusing - not in a bad way either, I suppose. You've got a simultaneous thing going on about ya."

Loona rolled her eyes at his tendency to use extensive words; "In Layman's terms, please."

"Sure, I'll put it bluntly. You've got two opposing sides."

Loona was rather baffled by the judgment that her tenant had just made clear to her, yet she was oddly curious - how did he know? "Are you saying I'm conflicted?"

"I wouldn't say conflicted necessarily, but you fight with yourself. I've noticed it as long as I've known ya," the human informs; "You've got two sides. While you've got the side that wants nothing to do with anything, you've also got an oddly courteous side; the side that saved me from bleeding out… alone. They're in constant battle with-"

"Stop."

"Hm?"

"Stop assuming things about me," Loona bluntly instructs, her tone serious and clearly displaying her mild annoyance; "That's something I'm really sick and tired of; assumptions. That shit really irks me the wrong way; when certain idiots try to figure me out, like I'm something to be studied. Like I'm not an individual that deserves a bit of overdue respect once in a while. "*Oh Loonie-Tooney, you're not a people person!*"; "*Oh, Loona? She's a good-for-nothing with a bad temper!*

She'll never amount to anything!"; "*Loona's a dumb, moody, selfish bitch"*, blah blah blah. Trust me; I've heard it all before, from many self-centered assholes who think they've got me figured out. It's tiring, having to hear people assume crap about me. I-I'm not saying that you're one of them! I'm just–…"

Loona paused for a minute to gather her thoughts, steadying her breath once more before continuing.

"Can you do me a huge favor?"

Jim nods; "Of course."

"Can you… can you promise that you won't ever become one of those judgmental assholes?"

"Loona mate, listen to me. I would never; you have my word on that."

"Thanks. … But really, thank you. It means a lot."

"No worries. Goodnight, Loona."

"Night."

Morger couldn't sleep.

It didn't matter how many times he chopped and changed his lying position within his bed, the hellhound was completely unable to get comfortable enough for sleep to settle in. To make the discomfort even worse for that time in the evening, his left shoulder blade had decided that now was the appropriate time to start aching, the flaring discomfort almost stabbing in its cruel nature. Morger lay completely flat on his back with his arms sprawled out across the bed, holding his eyes

closed while breathing slowly inward and outward, trying to relax each individual muscle in an almost micromanaging manner.

That's when he began to feel it; that warm, familiar, inviting feeling which was comparable to the feeling of a slow yet noticeable descent. It was the relieving feel of a comforting descent into sleep. Morger let out a sigh of relief as he felt his entire body creep further and further towards at last falling into slumber—

"***Ngah—!*** Mmmgh, dammit…"

Rudely reminding Morger of its presence was that same stabbing feeling within the center of his shoulder blade, aching sharper than it had ever done that night, almost as if it was sentient and taunting him in his almost desperate desire to sleep. With a disgruntled whine, Morger realized that it was hopeless; his body wanted to stay awake, at least temporarily. How long this would persist for was the pressing question now at hand.

The mildly frustrated hellhound's eyes fluttered open as he stared up towards the ceiling, his gaze unfocused and full of fatigue, along with his body which felt considerably numb with exhaustion. Within his mind was nothing but vacancy, his tired brain completely unable to conjure up any thoughts which would keep him occupied until slumber finally fell upon him. Instead, what Morger ultimately decided to do was try out something which he had heard from Loona herself. What he had heard from her was this; whenever she deemed it impossible to fall asleep, Loona would resort to staying completely still within the confines of her bed, simulating a proper slumber to regain her body's natural circadian rhythm.

In near desperation for sleep, that is what Morger decided to try and replicate, his head sunk into the blissful comfort of his pillows and the mattress he lay upon, attempting to completely disassociate with his surroundings – a perfect simulation of a state of sleep.

…

Then he became thirsty.

Morger let out an inconvenienced grumble as he begrudgingly decided to get out of bed, drowsily pulling off the covers and pivoting himself around so that he could get up, his feet making contact with the dull carpet of his room. The next effort he had to make was to fumble his way through the darkness to find the lightswitch, which eventually he did, albeit with a moment where he almost

tripped himself over. A quick flick of the switch prompted the lights to flicker open, the blinding light almost searing Morger's strained eyes as they adjusted to the sudden illuminance. His hand finds the door handle and turns it roughly, allowing for the door itself to swing open as the tiresome hellhound staggers through, his intention being to make a beeline straight to the kitchen to nourish himself.

Like a dehydrated desert wanderer discovering a legitimate source of water, Morger staggers over to the tap in the kitchen with a newly acquired glass, before holding it under the tap itself and releasing the water it contained with a brief turn of the faucet. The eagerly thirsty hellhound then drank the contents of his glass as soon as it was filled, an instant satisfaction as the cool water touched his lips, expelling any sense of thirst from his person. With a satisfied short exhale, Morger discarded the glass to the side of the kitchen sink, preparing it for future use if needs be. Now the hellhound was left with nothing else to do, resorting in the meantime to lean himself forward on the kitchen bench with his arms laid flat before him, supporting his upper body weight as he patiently waited for sleep to finally come to him.

Everything was dead silent until—

RIIIIIIING! … RIIIIIIING!

"WHAT IN THE— …huh?"

Morger jumps in near overwhelming fright as the blaring sound of the landline phone shatters the deafening silence! His head snapped towards the direction of the phone hung up on the wall, the digital-sounding ringing continuing to blare incessantly. Of course, the lone hellhound's instant thought was to go answer it, as one does with an apparent caller, but who could be calling him at this time of night? This question somewhat perplexed Morger as he approached the phone, deciding to answer the call. After picking up the receiver off the hook, he held up the phone to his ear and answered.

"H-Hello?"

*"**Yes, hello?"***

"Yeah, who is this?"

“Morger?”

“Loona? W-What’s up, why are you calling so late?”

“Yeah, it’s Loona.”

“Yeah I know it’s you, what’s going on?”

“Hey listen, I need your help for something.”

“Again? D-Did something happen?”

“Hey listen, I need your help for something.”

“I heard you the first time, Loona. What is it—”

“Hey listen, I need your help for something.”

“… You’re messing with me, aren't you? Listen, I’m not in the mood for jokes right now, at this time of night. I’m sleep deprived and I wanna slee—”

“Are you familiar with a ‘Francis Tyler’?”

Morger was just about to answer with more blatant frustration before he stopped himself, realizing that Loona’s voice was repeating words that had already been said in the past, in the exact same tone to which they had been delivered initially. A chill ran up his spine as he began to realize something; whatever this was, wasn’t “Loona”.

“I don’t understand—”

“Yeah, it’s Loona.”

…

“… W-Who is this?”

This time, instead of a voice, a faint white noise like that from an out-of-tune digital radio began emanating from the receiver, replacing the voice on the other end of the line.

…

Then the call ended.

As the flat-tone signaling the end of the call rang out softly from the receiver, a new feeling began to arise from within Morger, replacing the confusion which he had felt — Fear. He now felt an odd sense of unadulterated fear, yet he wasn’t sure why.

One thing was for certain though; something strange was happening—

Knock Knock Knock!

“Hello, I.M.P? … Yeah, what do you want? … Huh? … Wait, what are you- … Okay, stop! Listen, buddy, I can’t understand a single thing you’re saying. Either speak clearly or stop wasting my damn time.”

Loona reluctantly held the company phone to her ear, practically forcing herself to listen to the mad, incoherent ramblings of a potential client who was clearly intoxicated beyond all hope. From what little coherent information that she could decipher from the caller’s drunken slurring and

swearing, there was a “family friend” of the potential client who had either “sold” her out or “scolded” her out before then staging her death.

“Wow, that sounds sooo rough. You’re definitely the only one with problems around here,” Loona coldly replies with heavy sarcasm, already getting sick of the caller’s incoherent ranting; “We’re gonna need an address for this bitch. You got one, or you gonna belch into the phone some more?”

The impatient receptionist’s latter assumption proved to be true as more incoherent rambling could be heard through the receiver, causing the hellhound to roll her eyes in frustration.

“You know what? No. I’ve had it with you,” Loona callously interrupts the drunken caller; “Go and waste someone else’s time, yeah? Sober yourself up and call back if you still got that dumb gripe with that—… Wha— Well fuck you too! … No, you listen to ME, you cow! You ever call back, I’ll come over there and carve you a fresh new cakehole! … Yeah, you too sweetheart, piss right off!”

Clunk!

“See? That is exactly the bullshit I have to deal with,” Loona clearly explains to the young man leaning against the wall to her right, gesturing towards the phone as she did so.

“Huh…” Jim vocalizes, his eyebrow raised in slight astonishment at just how fiery Loona could get; “No kidding. She sounded kinda insane, hey?”

“I’d be surprised if there even IS anyone sane down here,” Loona snorts, finding Jim’s continuous somewhat naive observations mildly amusing; “If I wasn’t here, to cover your ass? You wouldn’t last a minute with those sickos hanging around.”

“Err... Nah, I don’t doubt that,” Jim winces slightly, trying his hardest not to imagine the horrors that he would be subjected to, once again being reminded against his will as to where exactly he was; “…I don’t even know how I’m still alive.”

“Mhm. I wouldn’t count your lucky stars just yet,” Loona advises with slight indifference, turning around to face the computer in order to perform some minimal effort work for a change.

This otherwise passing comment provoked a feeling of apprehension to emerge within the human's stomach once more, reminding him that vigilance was required to ultimately survive this ordeal.

"Too right," Jim agrees with Loona's sentiment, finishing his turn to speak with a reserved, weary smile. He was about to return to a state of silence until a question appeared within the forefront of his mind; "So what ended up happening yesterday?"

Without looking away from the computer screen, Loona replies; "You mean the interrogation?"

"Yeah. So, like, did you find him?"

"Yeah, we found him."

"Did he say much?"

Loona shook her head; "Other than harping on about Malloy and calling me a "Bitch"? Not really."

Jim's hopes slightly diminished upon hearing this uneventful development; "So a waste of time?"

"I wouldn't call it a waste of time," Loona was quick to assure; "He did give us some… interesting anecdotes, I guess you could call them?"

This revelation latched onto Jim's attention; "Such as?"

In order to focus on what she was about to reveal, Loona gave herself a break from the computer before turning to face the human; "Okay, so… he mentioned how Victor was his boss in this gang called the.. "Dead Men Walking" or something like that? Said that he used to take orders from the "Higher-Ups" and do their dirty work for them. Run of the mill insane shit like murder, intimidation, drug smuggling… I think he said something about weapon smuggling too?"

"Sounds about right," the human comments quietly, taking it all in.

Loona continues; “He started going on about how there was some weird code which stopped them from ever asking or knowing where the “Higher-Ups” did their planning. There was also a mention of Black Magic being used somewhere, but he said that was just a rumor — I don’t think it’s just some rumor though...”

Jim solemnly nods his head; “Hm… So just a whole lotta rambling, huh?”

“Pretty much,” Loona admits; “But he did say he would help me find out more. Something about finding this guy called… Jack Foster, I think his name was?”

“Jack Foster…?”

The hellhound couldn’t help but notice a slightly troubled look appear on the young man’s face, as if the name conjured up a feeling of disturbing familiarity about the name.

Loona raised her eyebrow before inquiring; “Do you know him?”

Jim shook his head, his brow furrowed in thoughtful confusion; “No, not at all. The name sounds familiar though, I’m not sure why. … I feel I’ve heard it somewhere…” The human let out a discomforted wince as he rubbed his forehead, a tension headache beginning to make itself known; “*Argh!* Bloody head hurts. Mind if I go outside for a minute?”

“Be my guest, I’m not stopping you,” Loona insists as she waved him off, not necessarily seeing the problem with waiting out on a floor which seldom anyone visits anyway.

The hellhound receptionist watched on as the human stepped out into the hallway, the door lightly slamming shut behind him, leaving Loona once more to her own solitary devices within the office. Of course, she wasn’t completely alone, with Blitz residing within his office to the right of her, the faint sound of some kind of video playing on his phone indicating that he was definitely present.

Catching Loona completely off-guard was the sudden, all-too familiar feeling of fatigue caused by boredom. This feeling was accompanied by the impulsive urge to yawn, which she gladly abided by, allowing herself to let out a whining dog-like yawn, miniscule droplets of tears on the corners

of her eyes forming as she did so. Once Loona's blissfully satisfying urge to yawn had been fulfilled, she allowed herself to check her phone for the time, finding that it was still fairly early in the morning, with Millie and Moxxie not expected to be back for another good couple of hours yet.

A bored sigh left Loona's mouth as she kicked up her feet on top of the reception desk which she sat behind, allowing herself to sink further into her office chair to laze around that while longer. Fortunately for the hellhound, it didn't take much to make herself comfortable as she lazily slumped in her laid back position, folding her arms together and deciding to close her eyes.

To pass the time, Loona had quickly decided to generously give herself a Power Nap.

…

RIIIIIIIINNNG !!

"SNRK—?!?"

Loona practically jumps out of her own skin as she is awoken to an ear-piercing noise, blaring obnoxiously in her ear like a terribly rude wake-up call! The receptionist's fight-or-flight instincts immediately kicked in as she tried hastily to make sense of her surroundings, only to soon realize that it was the company phone blaring in her ears, to her utmost annoyance — she could've sworn she left it off the hook.

Regardless of what she may have done, duty still called whether she liked it or not…

With an inconvenienced grumble, Loona rubbed her eyes from her brief slumber as she picked up the phone and holding the receiving end to her ear; "Nnnrgh… H-Hello, I.M.P?"

"Hey! Hey listen, lady; it's me!"

"… Who the fuck is "me"? D-Do I know you?"

“I-It’s Francis Tyler! Ya know, the prick ya beat up last night??”

This sudden reveal of identity prompted Loona to become much more attentive, sitting herself upright as she listened intently; “F-Francis?? Huh. Never thought you’d actually call. Did you find that Foster guy, or are you here to waste my time again?”

“Nah nah, that’s the thing, chief! I-I found him!” Francis explains with almost excited enthusiasm; “I-It’s funny how I found him actually! Was tryna find a propah bar to loitah around, ended up on the othah side of the city. He tried to cut me fuggen arm off when I approached him, but I know where he’s held up!”

“Then tell me already! I really don’t have all day,” Loona impatiently demands, lightly tapping her fingers against the desk in a fidgety manner.

“A-Alrighty,” Francis replied; “Ya may wanna write this down!”

“Got it,” Loona most simply states, grabbing her phone and opening up a “notepad”. With her phone on standby and ready for use, the hellhound speaks into the receiver; “Now spit it out. Don’t you *DARE* lie to me either, ‘cause I will find out if you are.”

“I won’t, I promise! S-So on the outskirts of the city, there’s this abandoned three-storey apartment buildin’, yeah? It’s got a distinct “L” shape. T-The first and second floor windahs are completely fucked-up and boarded up, but the third floor looks almost intact — Jack Fostah lives up there, completely alone. He’s done up the bastard place, I gotta hand it to him!”

“Which outskirts?” Loona intently asks, tapping away at the keypad on her phone’s screen as she jotted down the key details.

“On the western side, just up the road from this little cafe,” the sinner obliged by Loona’s request for more specific information; “I promise ya won’t miss it!”

The acutely focused hellhound wrote a small addendum note next to the initial dot point, highlighting the words “small cafe” as a crucial point of reference, making sure to clarify in the note that it was located on the “western side” of the city.

“Do you know what this “Jack Foster” guy looks like,” Loona inquired further, wanting a clear and concise description so as to not make any avoidable mistakes; “Any, like, defining features of his?”

“He’s this raunchy, stocky lookin’ thing. Almost like a… h-he almost looks like how I remembah him! He still looks pretty human, but more disheveled.. and mangy. He’s got this huge buggah-off scar runnin’ down the side of his cheek,” Francis emphasizes in a bid to help the hellhound receptionist acquire a rough idea of Jack Foster’s outward looks.

Although within her own mind she found this description slightly too vague for her own liking, Loona jotted it down regardless; “I’ll keep that in mind…”

“Also! O-One more thing I should tell ya!”

“What.”

Confusion arose within Loona as she heard a nervous chuckle emanate through the phone; “I remembah old Jack when he was alive, and uhh… H-He’s not one to talk without bribin’ him first.”

This inconvenient fact was enough for Loona to verbally lash out; “Ohhhh for fuck sakes, you tell me this NOW?! I knew you’d waste my damn time!!”

Francis was quick to assure Loona; “Waitwaitwait!! He will talk if ya give him somethin’, I guarantee ya–”

“GUARANTEE MY ASS!! … Okay, *WHAT*?! What do I give this bastard??”

“Have ya got any whiskey?? H-He always loved his grog! Drank it like bloody wortah, he did!”

Loona pondered upon this slither of information, trying to figure out where exactly she would acquire whiskey as a bribing tool. That’s when she realized that perhaps something sentimental and familiar to this “Jack Foster” would get him to speak; her private stash of human world whiskey.

Initially, Loona was completely against the idea of handing over something of her own to some repugnant sinner, but at the end of the day, what other choice did she have?

A defeated sigh left Loona's mouth as she finally answered; "...Yeah. Yeah, I've got some whiskey. Will that make him sing?"

"HAH! No doubt about it, chief–"

"Don't call me "chief"," Loona bluntly corrects the sinner, getting sick and tired of the word.

"Right! Soz… Okay, look, t-this is where I must leave ya," the caller announces, letting out a wheezing cough as he said so.

"Sure," Loona replies. She was about to hang up the phone before a question slipped into the forefront of her mind; "Oh hey, listen up; one more thing."

"Ah yeah?"

"How dangerous is this prick?"

"Errr— Just about as dangerous as everyone else down here, nuthin' special," the sinner informs.

"… Right," Loona replies as she looks over everything she had written down on her phone, double checking to see if everything she had noted down was correct.

Without saying another word or even the hint of a verbal farewell, Loona at last hangs up the phone, personally glad that she no longer had to listen to Francis' irritating, sniveling voice for another second. Her eyes return back towards the "notepad" opened up on her phone, examining every word intently as if they were the most interesting things the world had to offer. As she finished proofreading her notes, Loona couldn't help but wonder if finding this "Jack Foster" would eventuate into something much more productive than her encounter with "Francis Tyler", a hint of doubt beginning to manifest itself within her. It seemed that up until now, nothing was eventuating, nothing was getting better. Progress seemed to have completely stagnated if there was

that much progress at all, leaving her into a situation that could be much more perilous than she could've ever imagined. For the briefest of moments, Loona once again began to wonder if both herself and Jim would come out on top, a question which she once more hoped would be a matter of "*when"* rather than "*if"*…

… Speaking of that human, where was he?

Just as this realization crossed Loona's mind, she pivoted around within her office chair to check the time; twenty-five minutes had passed since the time she decided to take a power nap, confirming to the hellhound that she had been asleep longer than expected. This factor was a cause for mild surprise, but more so a slight cause for concern; assuming that he hadn't come back inside at any point while Loona slept, Jim had definitely been outside for longer than he had been than any instance before. Out of an abundance of curiosity to the human's current whereabouts, Loona decided to get up from her seat and head outside.

As she approached the door, Loona made a rather strange observation which made her freeze. Through the long horizontal window viewing outwards into the hallway, she noticed that, interestingly enough, the window peering into Verosika's own part of the floor had its velvet curtains drawn, completely pulled together tightly. Loona narrowed her eyes to a squint, a growing suspicion emerging as she intently examined the strange development.

Suddenly, something clicked within Loona's mind which made her eyes shoot wide open in an awful, near horrifying realization…

They found him.

"… But that's enough about me! Why not talk a little about yourself, hm~?"

"And for what reason, woman."

"Now that's no way to talk to a sweet little thing like me, now is it~?"

Within the shut-off confines of her recording studio, Verosika was right in the middle of attempting to get familiar with her newest, most unique backstage “guest”; a lonesome human which she had come across who was leant up against the wall, all reserved with his arms folded. The succubus had managed to “gently coax” the young man into her studio, managing to slowly hound him into her side of the floor with the help of another member of her posse, Josh. For the past fifteen minutes, Verosika had been attempting to have some “*fun*” with this interesting young human, trying her hardest to make small talk with him.

Unfortunately for the succubus, her plan wasn’t exactly working.

“Come on, big guy,” Josh intervenes from the sidelines, pouring himself a drink of some velvety concoction of some dubious description; “Why don’t you talk to her? She won’t bite~”

“You listen to me,” Jim states with absolute firmness in his demeanor, jabbing his finger towards Josh’s general direction; “There’s no way I’m accepting advances from the likes of you, yeah? Get that through ya head.”

Verosika seemed to act none the wiser; “Hm? When did we say anything about advancements?”

“Oh bore off,” Jim snorts with a hint of wit about him; “I wasn’t born yesterday! I know exactly what ya two are doing; tryna get me all friendly with you both with all of this sweet little, arty-farty small talk, and that’s when ya strike! Yeah nah, sorry matey, that’s not happening.”

This apparent display of utmost resilience seemed to both confuse and somewhat impress both Verosika and Josh as they examined the human with continued fascinated curiosity. It was beyond strange enough that there was a human within their midst in the first place, but one which was as apparently resilient as he outwardly let on? It was almost completely bewildering.

“Wait-wait-wait, so how and why exactly are you down here in the first place?” Josh asks, finally asking the pressing question on both his and Verosika’s mind.

Jim glared towards the incubus, his eyes piercing and distrustful which sent a shiver up Josh’s spine; “Long story, and one which I’m not gonna give you the luxury of telling ya both.”

Verosika cocked her head slightly with an almost smug knowing grin on her face; “It has to do with those bozos across the hall, doesn’t it?”

“... No comment.”

“Oh come on,” Verosika prods with a slightly flirtatious smirk; “It does, doesn’t it? How else would a well-built, handsome looking thing be down here~?”

“... As I said, no comment.”

“Why don’t you loosen yourself up, sir? You seem quite tense,” Josh grins as he comes over, offering the human a short glass of some mesmerizing liquid, its scent having the same potency of some sort of wine-spirits cocktail.

Without any hint of flinching, Jim examines the concoction before him, then moving his eyes up towards Josh’s own before speaking once more; “Get that rat piss away from me, chief.”

“Hmm! You are very resilient,” Verosika congratulates as a form of flattery; “But seriously, do tell me anything about yourself! Forget that Josh is even here, just look at me. I promise no more advances, okay?”

“Anything, huh?”

Verosika nods with a warm smile; “Anything.”

Jim stares at the being before him, giving her a suspicious look before deciding to tell her “anything”.

“... Trust me, lady, you’d find nothing interesting about me,” Jim admits; “I’m a simple man trying to live a simple life. At the moment? I’m in deep shit, as you can see.”

Verosika seemed somewhat surprised by this revelation; “So you’re not dead?”

“Nope. Not yet at least,” the human confirms; “As I said to ya both; it’s a long story I’m not willing to tell.”

Verosika slowly nods as she pulled up a chair for herself, sitting in front of the most interesting “simple” human in front of her, crossing her legs as she sat; “You’re not very… tempted by me, are you?”

“Yeah, no shit,” the witty human smirks; “I know how to control myself, that’s why.”

The curious succubus raises her eyebrow, letting out quite the sultry, flirtatious giggle; “I think we can change that after a little while together, big guy~ I can see it in you, you’re flustered over me~ … So who brought you down here? Which one of those asshats over there?”

Jim let out a snort, finding that “*asshat*” was the perfect description for the founder of that certain company; “I don’t think you’d believe me if I said–”

CRASH!!

“VEROSIKAAAAA!!”

A booming, almost animalistic voice petrified the living daylights out of everyone in the room! There was no mistake to be made as to who exactly the voice belonged to, either. Verosika quickly spun around to find the entrance doors swung right open, and standing with a look of intense, red-hot anger on her face was Loona, growling intensely like a vicious, primal animal gone mad!

With a feeling of more confusion than fear, Verosika began to inquire; “And what exactly are you doing in—”

“WHAT’S IT LOOK LIKE, *BITCH*?! I’m taking him back!” Loona barked as she stormed right up to the succubus, glaring intensely at her with piercing eyes!

Perhaps unwisely, Josh decided to interject with his own statement; “Hold on just a moment, we’re not done with him yet!”

Loona was having none of this; “You better back the fuck off before I punch you in your ugly face again, Josh!”

With this stark warning delivered to both of the sultry beings, Loona proceeds to approach Jim before helping him off the chair, practically herding the young man out hastily to his honest relief; at least he had conquered the temptations that he had been put through for the past fifteen minutes.

Just as the hellhound cleared the doorway, Loona sharply spins around to deliver one final word; “You’re both pathetic, you know what? *PATHETIC*!”

With this final word delivered, Loona grabbed both handles of the entrance door before closing them with a loud, intense slam!

“Huh…” Josh quietly commented, feeling a sense of shock of the sudden in-and-out confrontation which had just come and gone; “Well that was weird.”

“Y-Yeah…” Verosika agreed, just as shocked by the ferocity of the hellhound as the incubus was; “… Dammit, I never got his name, either.”

Anabasis

Loona swung the entrance door wide open as she swiftly ushered Jim back into the relative safety of the IMP Headquarters, the hellhound still shaking with leftover adrenaline from the verbal hell that she gave Verosika.

"Okay! This really isn't working," Loona admitted as she abruptly slammed the door shut as soon as her escort was inside; "First Millie and Moxxie find out, then Vortex, and now Verosika. Fucking Verosika! Congrats, Jim, you're on your way to be hell's most well known secret!"

"Huh.. Some "secret" I am," Jim quietly commented as he brushed himself off, looking back towards the door to make sure they hadn't been followed by the succubus and her accomplice; "… Y-You reckon she'll start yapping about me being here?"

"That's what I'm afraid of," Loona anxiously admits, glaring through the window viewing out into the hallway to observe Verosika's studio for any movement; "Everyone else has understood how urgent it is to shut up about you being down here. But Verosika? She'd sell her own MOM for some gossip, especially if it's to hit out on us!"

It was this revelation which sent a near paralyzing chill up Jim's spine, a sudden rush of fear beginning to cloud his mind. He knew for certain, without a shred of doubt, that if the wider underworld got word of his presence, he would be in for a world of trouble; perhaps even more trouble than he already found himself in.

"Shit…," Jim swore under a slightly worried breath, before hastily composing himself; "I-Is there any way to convince her to keep her mouth shut?"

Loona shook her head; "Nope! Not the faintest idea! It'd take a fucking career-ruining disaster to shut her up!"

In what was perhaps a slightly futile attempt to ease the situation, Jim brought forth a question; "How do we know she would say anything in the first place??"

Loona let out a sarcastic and nervous laugh; “HAH— Why wouldn’t she? It’s the ultimate topic of dumb celebrity gossiping to use against her shitty Ex-Boyfriend! Think about it, the tacky magazine headlines; “Verosika’s shitty Ex’s daughter who keeps a living, breathing human as an exotic pet!””

Jim ran his fingers through his hair as he paced around; “Errr— fuckin’ hell.. I guess that’s another thing we’re just gonna have to… wait, Ex-Boyfriend?”

Speaking of...

An excruciatingly loud SLAM startles both human and hellhound as Blitz comes storming out of his office!

“What’s this I hear?? Do I hear talk about a certain SUCCUBITCH?!?”

Loona spun around to face Blitz, his face an outward expression of both curiosity and annoyance.

“Uhh, y-yeah. You heard right,” Loona quickly admitted, beginning to hold her left forearm nervously.

Blitz reacted to his daughter’s response by pinching the space between his eyes; “And for WHAT exact reason should we be wasting our breaths talking or even thinking about that skank-queen??”

An exchange of hesitant looks was shared between both Loona and Jim as they stood in awkward silence, the tension in the room only growing with every passing second as Blitz stared at the pair of them with growing suspicion, his arms now folded like a scolding father figure.

It wasn’t long until Blitz’s patience ran out; “Oh for fuck sake— CAN ONE OF YOU SPEAK?!”

The aggravated imp’s daughter decided to take on the burden; “You really wanna know, Blitz? Are you positive??”

Blitz nodded his head rigidly; “Well there has to be SOME reason why you gotta be talking about her! Go on, what’s the point of discussion? Her obvious plastic surgery? Her fake tits?? Her—”

“Verosika knows about Jim.”

“… She WHAT?!?”

A look of pure horror spread across Blitz’s face as his eyes widened, tilting his head back while holding his forehead and horns; “How?!? How in the ever-loving FUCK did she manage to find out about this fleabag?? Why her?!”

“She found him in the hallway. That Josh creep was with her too. They forced him into her studio and tried to “you-know-what” with him,” Loona went on to explain, alleviating her father’s frantic questioning.

A low, guttural painted mumble emanated from Blitz as he hunched himself over as if he was in pain; “Oouughh.. This is just great. This is so fucking great! EXACTLY what I need! I can never get a moment of peace and happiness because fuck me, right?!”

“Ohhh I see! So this is all about you now??” Loona piped up once more, who was just as anxious as the imp.

Blitz rolled his eyes dramatically, “Please don’t twist my words, Loona, you know precisely what I me—…”

The imp paused mid sentence as his eyes stared passed in between Loona and Jim, looking right through the glass and into the hallway with an almost glassy-eyed stare. It was immediately obvious to Loona as to who exactly her father was staring at as she turned to look behind her, Jim doing the same shortly afterwards. Sure enough, the trio spot both Verosika and Josh who were sliding back the velvety curtains covering their own respective window, the seductive pair obviously preparing to leave.

After what felt like an eternity of merely staring onwards at both the succubus and the accompanying member of her usual posse, it was Blitz who made the first move by shoving both human and hellhound out of his way as he made a swift beeline to the front door!

“Blitz, no, just— Blitz! D-Dad, just wait a second!!” Loona called out firmly as she braced herself for the ensuing confrontation which was now imminent.

Unfortunately for Loona it was obviously too late, the bewildered hellhound watching on helplessly as the imp went out into the hallway, ready to confront his targets with whatever poorly-executed fury he could muster! With an aggravated sigh, Loona decided to follow after the furious imp, but not before directing Jim to stay firmly put within the relatively safety of the office — an order which the human gladly abided by.

With great strides, Loona followed right after Blitz, watching on as the imp fast approached both of his rivals who were now waiting by the elevator, approaching them from behind. No second thought was given as Blitz then called out down the hallway with a gruff, flustered tone to his voice.

“Hey asshats!!”

As expected from such a provocative callout, both Verosika and Josh immediately spun around, lowering their eye-level to the fast approaching imp. Immediately after recognising in an instant that it was none other than Blitz, the collective reaction went from one of startled confusion to that of preparing for whatever verbal garbage they would be unwillingly subjected to. Loona wasn’t too far behind, calling out harshly to Blitz in a desperate effort to prevent further drama from occurring; an effort which Loona knew would ultimately be futile.

Blitz stormed right up to both incubus and succubus as he jabbed a stern finger at them collectively; “Just WHAT do you think you two dick jockeys are doing getting involved in my daughter’s business??”

Verosika rolled her eyes, pretty much dismissing the imp’s aggression; “Oh give it a rest, Blitzo! We were just checking the human out, no harm was done.”

The aggravated imp was having none of this; “My ass! You’re putting my daughter into more trouble and stress than she already is, you hear me? You two listen the fuck up, read my lips; you are NOT to breathe a word about this to anyone outside of this piece-of-shit building, capiche—?”

Josh let out a cocky snicker; “Tsk.. And what if we do, imp?”

“Then you’ll both be roped into the mess that I’m in!” Loona emphatically warns, her voice expressing the urgency and seriousness of the matter.

A rather disparaging snicker came from Verosika; “Pfhah—! A mess I’m sure you put yourself in, no doubt!”

In direct response to this insulting comment, Loona let out a menacing growl, baring her teeth in blatant aggravation!

The hellhound’s ferociously aggressive reaction was a source of entertainment for Verosika, who chuckled with a provocative grin; “Oh just relax, will you? I may not even say anything! Probably not worth my time anyway.”

Loona scowled further as she squinted suspiciously at Verosika, wanting to believe the succubus’ somewhat promising words yet finding it so incredibly hard to do so.

“What’s so special about that human anyway?” Verosika further inquired as she shifted her posture, placing her hand upon her hip; “I’d expect a big hunk of human like that to be butchered by the both of you by now. It’s a wonder that he’s still alive.”

“Hmph. Got that right,” Loona mumbled under her breath, agreeing with the statement entirely but for more compassionate reasons.

“It’s none of your business, shitbag!” Blitz scowled; “Now get the fuck out of here before I escalate this further!”

A smug exchange of looks was shared between Verosika and Josh, the pair of them silently agreeing that they best leave the scene from here and leave Blitz to his multitude of problems. In what was near impeccable timing, the elevator doors rolled open to allow the pair of them to enter inside, which they did. Not long after stepping inside the elevator and pressing the button for the ground floor, the metallic doors began to roll shut with a metallic squeak. Verosika took this as an opportunity to jab her middle finger up towards Blitz, a grotesque gesture which the imp fiercely repeated back, if not more vigorously before the doors finally slammed shut.

With the sudden heated confrontation now done for, Blitz pivoted around to face Loona. The imp stared at the hellhound with a frustrated look in his eyes, pursing his lips before delivering his next words in a blunt fashion; “You really gotta get him out of here.”

Loona rolled her eyes as she folds her arms together; “As if I don’t already know that.”

Blitz let out a mentally exhausted exhale as he rubbed his eyes; “Sure. … H-How long now, Loonie? How much longer do I need to tolerate that dickweed’s presence?? I’m not even angry about it anymore, I’m just tired.”

The hellhound couldn’t help but squint in bafflement; “I’m sorry, but what do you have to be “tired” about? I’m the one who’s been needing to look out for Jim’s safety as well as my own! You don’t hear me bitching about it, now do you??”

“But I don’t get why you don’t!” The exhausted imp exclaims, shrugging his arms to emphasize the point; “Why?? How don’t you see that he’s just a massive hindrance to all of us?? Our lives? Our business?? Our–”

“BECAUSE I’M NOT THAT FUCKING SELFISH, DAD!! YOU ARE!!”

“... Wh–... Did you just call me–”

“YES! Yes I did, and I’ll gladly say it again!!” Loona bellowed as she gave the imp a deeply scolding look, deciding to finally give Blitz a piece of her mind after the past three days; “You’re really damn selfish – you just.. are, and I don’t know why!! All you’ve been doing these past three or so days is bitch CONSTANTLY about him being here! You’ve made this entire situation all about you, and solely you! What about me, Blitz?! What about how I feel? Do you seriously think I love being under this much stress??”

Blitz was left complete and utterly speechless, the imp staring wide-eyed at his daughter as if he had been shell-shocked.

Regardless of the imp’s reaction, Loona persisted; “Last night was the final fucking straw for me, it really was! I’m not standing by and letting you bully whoever you want because YOU feel

inconvenienced by them! If you don't stop your bullshit, then I'm leaving — for good!! … Do you understand, or do I need to punch it into you??"

"… I… sweetie, I—…"

Blitz had been left completely lost for words, practically being left completely paralyzed where he stood. Loona had done many things before, including but not limited to fits of frantic, unadulterated rage where reason was completely out of the picture. But threatening to leave? That was a novel and obscene threat, but one which seemed to carry weight to it, hitting the imp like a truck; so much so that it sent a paralyzing chill throughout his whole body. There was a long, drawn-out silence which seemed to last for an eternity, until Blitz finally spoke.

"… When M&M get back, take him out of here for a while.. b-back up into the human world for a day at most, then bring him back. We can't have more incidents like this one we had with Verosika. … It's best if we stay away from each other for a while."

Loona squinted sternly at Blitz, still aggravated with his conduct; "Agreed."

With this final word delivered, the hellhound let out a rough sigh before storming back into the office and slamming the entrance door shut behind her, leaving her father alone out in the loneliness of the hallway.

A deafening silence filled the hallway once more as Blitz seriously pondered the contents of his daughter's sudden outburst, the words she so harshly expressed sitting firmly within the forefront of his mind. A deep pensiveness took hold of Blitz as he stood motionless in a stiff manner, his eyes unfocused as he contemplated the severity of Loona's threat to leave. Out of nowhere, an odd sensation began to manifest within the imp; a feeling which seldom appeared, but whenever it did, it caused his very core to stammer with its potency.

It was the sensation of guilt.

Almost immediately, Blitz's first instinct was to completely disregard the idea that he could be at any fault — it was a ridiculous thought! How could he be wrong in his conviction? That human — that "Jim-Boy", that sad sack of crap — had no damn business down here, and he knew it! Who was this mere, pitiful human to make himself comfortable within Blitz's office and his apartment anyway??

Yet, despite his firm conviction on the subject… something told him he was wrong.

So terribly wrong.

This intrusive self-doubting thought provoked Blitz to curse under his breath as he forced out a sneer, that oh-so foreign feeling of “guilt” still lingering no matter how hard he tried to dismiss it. Instead of returning inside, the lone imp decided that it was best to keep to his word and remained outside, begrudgingly separating himself from his own daughter.

Blitz had some thinking to do.

With an obviously annoyed look upon her face, Loona marched right back inside the office before forcefully slamming the door shut behind her!

This immediately caught Jim’s attention; “Ey up? What’s up with you then?"

“We’re leaving for a while,” Loona abruptly replies, running her fingers through her hair in a sign of her stress; “I’m taking you up to the living world for a bit, at most a day. I just– I-I can’t take his bullshit anymore!”

Jim raised his brow; “Really? Where are you thinking of going??”

Loona shrugged; “I don’t know, that’s what I’m trying to figure out; where to go. Do you have any ideas??”

“I think you know my answer to that one,” the human solemnly replied; “I don’t think the time’s right for that yet, innit?”

The hellhound let off a saddened yet serious look, solemnly nodding her head; “Yeah… sorry, dude. But hey, we can hide out somewhere for the day. Maybe we can find a place where nobody would recognise you?”

Jim let out a brief snort as he smirked; “Hah– I mean, you could’ve phrased that so it doesn’t sound as shady, but I getcha. Uhh, fucken… oh shit, where to go..?”

“Hey! No rush,” Loona reassured; “We gotta wait for the other two to get back before we can finally get outta here. Gives us plenty of time to think.”

“Hm… So what happened out there with Blitz?”

A gruff strained sigh left Loona’s clenched teeth as she rubbed the bridge of her nose; “I gave him a piece of my mind, that’s what happened out there! I’m not joking when I say that I’m this close to wringing his stupid little neck!”

“Errr.. I can imagine,” Jim mumbled as he scratched his chin, noticing that his stubble was beginning to grow thicker, signaling the early signs of a beard beginning to form; “Oh jeez, I needa shave… good thing we’re heading back up. Oh bugger it, I don’t have any cash on me!”

“Don’t worry, I’ll let you borrow some of mine,” the hellhound reassured as she checked her phone for the time; barely ten minutes had passed since the initial fierce interaction with none other than that flirtatious pop star, Verosika.

The sudden intrusive blaring of Loona’s mobile phone startled both human and hellhound out of their conversation, the hellhound glancing down at her phone before realizing that it was Moxxie calling her. Without much hesitation, Loona answered the call before holding it up to her ear.

“Yeah? Are you two done now, or…? … Okay, cool. Give me a minute, I’ll let you two back through.”

The receptionist immediately hung up the call before leaving for the other room, excusing herself to Jim as she grabbed the grimoire, before promptly moving herself into the summoning room for that bit of extra required space. After shutting the door to the reception room behind her, Loona

flicked the grimoire open as she had done countless times before, proceeding to summon a portal to allow Millie and Moxxie to return back to the headquarters.

As soon as the portal was opened, Moxxie sprung right through with a tired huff and his rifle slung over his shoulder, Millie following closely behind as she cleaned the remnants of grotesque, sickening residue off her axe. Whilst Moxxie completely ignored Loona's presence and trundled his way towards the couch for some rest, it was Millie who noticed the slightly pensive yet frustrated look within the hellhound's eyes.

Curiosity managed to get the better of Millie as she asked; "Ya okay there?"

Loona appeared somewhat perplexed; "What?"

"What's the matter with you?" Millie asked once more; "Ya got a look in your eye."

Loona sneered weakly; "What's it to you? It's none of your business."

The female imp threw her hand up in a deescalating gesture; "Aight, I was only askin'. Ya don't have to get all uppity with me now."

"I'm not being uppity! I'm just…" Loona paused for a very brief moment before exhaling deeply through her nose; "Millie, listen to me – I'm just really fucking tired right now, okay? I'm gonna go up to the human world with Jim, to get away from Blitz for a while."

Millie squinted her eyes a little, trying to figure out what happened through the means of guess work; "Why? Did somethin' happ—"

"No! Nothing happened! Blitz needs him out of here for a while and I'm doing exactly that. Just drop it, okay? Please stop asking."

Although Millie was most definitely taken aback by the hellhound's short and sudden outburst which only led to more questions, she decided that perhaps it was best to abide by the demand. The

last thing the imp was in the mood for after a hit was an umpteenth verbal altercation with none other than Loona.

"… Sure," Millie obliged, shrugging her shoulders before walking right past and back out into the reception room, leaving Loona alone once more to the mercy of her thoughts.

Loona proceeds to close the portal before folding the grimoire shut, her fed-up mind full of exhausted frustration as she makes her way back outside. She finds that Millie and Moxxie were still present and winding down after their job for the day, as well as Jim with his blue shirt half unbuttoned, looking down towards the gauze patches still stuck firmly to his abdomen, obviously in the middle of checking over his inflicted wounds. Most notable of all, if not far more prominent than those currently present with Loona in the room, was the clear absence of her father who would usually be causing some form of rowdy conversation or another. Instead, the usually extroverted and outwardly crude imp was now closeted and silent, isolating himself within the hallway.

Completely alone.

Regardless of the abnormality of the atmosphere, Loona's heart remained hardened against Blitz, firmly standing by her convictions about his downright insufferable mannerisms. In fact, she felt peculiarly satisfied that she spoke her mind so vigorously mere minutes ago, as if the outburst was an instantaneous temporary release valve against all the stresses of the past three to four days.

The question which now remained was whether or not Blitz would listen.

Speaking of, the front door swung gently open with Blitz deciding to rejoin his employees, yet his demeanor was reserved and silent, his face wearing a blank and solemn expression.

It was Moxxie who decided to greet his boss; "Oh, sir! We managed to… Y-You doing okay there?"

Blitz was momentarily despondent; "… Hm? Yeah, I'm fine."

Moxxie wasn't convinced by this half hearted reassurance; "A-Are you sure?"

“Yup. Perfectly,” Blitz flatly replies; “You two can go home now.”

“O-Oh, okay..? But so soon??”

The oddly reserved imp pivoted his head up slowly to meet Moxxie’s gaze; “I’m positive.”

It was around this point when Millie began to eye Loona in a slightly suspicious manner, obviously making a clear connection between Blitz’s very odd demeanor and Loona’s behavior in the summoning room. Loona felt Millie’s analyzing practically stabbing her, causing the hellhound to feel a growing sense of discomfort.

There was an uncompromising and eerie silence as both Millie and Moxxie left for the day, the pair of imps quietly slipping out through the door, not daring to break the silence which had a foothold over the atmosphere. After one last glance back inside the headquarters, Millie sighed in exhaustion from the day as she quietly closed the door between herself and Blitz.

And then there were three.

“... So.. what? Are you two leaving, or what’s the plan?” Blitz flatly inquired, his eyes glued to Loona as he had no desire to even acknowledge the young bushman – at least for now.

Loona slowly nodded her head as she glared back coldly at her father; “Yeah. Yeah, we’re leaving. … Come on, Jim; let’s go,” she says, heading into the summoning room while waving the young man over to follow her inside.

Jim chooses to abide by Loona’s order, proceeding to follow her into the room as the hellhound quickly summons a portal, though she wasn’t sure of where it led exactly. All that she knew is that it was a place which neither of them had been before; somewhere new and isolated, yet familiar and tranquil. The young man was about to step through the open doorway into the summoning room where Loona resided when a voice called out to him.

“Hey,” Blitz’s voice calls out in a monotone fashion, obviously wanting the human’s attention.

Hesitation managed to get the better of Jim for a second before he worked up the courage to turn around and face the imp; “What.”

What came after was a short, tense period of silence and an exchange of mutual cold glances, with Blitz staring intently at the human while obviously deeply submerged in his thoughts; specifically what those thoughts were was up to anyone’s wildest of guesses. Eventually, Blitz narrowed his eyes and stiffly shook his head, before waving the human off with a weak hand. With a bout of mild confusion about him, Jim does good by Blitz’s gestured dismissal and linked back up with Loona in the summoning room, proceeding to close the door behind him.

And then there was one.

A light, whimsical, patchy fog hung low over the richly green terrain as the morning sun arose for another day in the eastward direction. The sunrays pierced through the fog and the large patches of accumulated native trees, providing an embracing warmth over the land in what was otherwise a very chilly morning, the temperature dropping over the past fortnight. Amidst the beauty and splendor of this tranquil valley landscape was a quaint old fashioned Motel, nestled on the side of a winding main road and surrounded by trees which shrouded the old styled, single-storey, sandstone accommodation buildings.

Slowly pacing herself within the boundaries of this property was the owner; a short old woman in her 60s, dressed in a long dark overcoat, a white and navy-blue blouse and a long maroon dress down to her ankles, complete with a pair of black slip-on shoes. Her short, graying curly hair was neatly combed and showed remarkable signs of health, the same definitely being applicable to her wrinkled, aged, yet kindly face, complete with a pair of old-fashioned small, round spectacles sitting comfortably upon her nose.

The kindly, aging Motel owner slowly hobbled her way towards the main road with a wheelie bin in tow, at last arriving on the boundary where the gravel driveway ended and positioning the bin neatly to the side for collection. After completing this rather menial task, the owner turns back around to return back towards the reception desk where she usually sat for most of the day when not occupied with other more pressing chores. In spite of her sluggish walking speed, it didn’t take too long for her to step back up onto the veranda where the door to the reception desk stood. Just before she could open the door, a voice called out to her from the direction of where she came.

“Uh, hey! Excuse me!”

The motel owner turns around to discover that the individual calling for her attention was a pale young lady in her early 20s. The visitor in question wore a dark gray crop top and a pair of black shorts with a crescent moon, as well as a pair of black thigh high socks, fingerless gloves, and some black and white casual shoes. The visitor also had long, silver hair which stretched past her shoulders and behind her back, swaying ever so gently in the misty breeze which periodically coasted through.

"Oh, good morning, dear!" The old lady greets sincerely with an old-fashioned Australian accent; "I-Is there anything I can do for you?"

"I hope so," the newcomer replies; "Do you have a room for two people available, or…?"

"I will have to have a look," the owner replies; "I'm just opening up reception here as we speak. Do come inside, it's terribly cold!"

"Thanks," the new arrival expresses her gratitude before turning her head to her right and waving at someone to come over; "Hey! Are you coming?"

"Yeah, I'm coming!" A masculine voice calls right back, the voice belonging to a tall young man dressed in a blue button-up shirt, a pair of black trousers and richly brown boots.

The elderly woman examines the pair of potential new tenants with analyzing but fair eyes, only wanting to get to know their faces better. Without asking any further questions, the motel owner pivots back around and unlocks the door with a set of keys, proceeding to push the door in and allowing it to swing gently open with a creak. Once the door was open, the elderly lady hobbled inside as she rubbed her hands together to warm herself up. Loona was following slowly behind, glad to feel the relative warmth of the interior compared to the chilly, punishing bite of the outside world.

"You must be so terribly freezing, dearest!" The motel owner told her latest guest; "W-Would you like a coat of sorts? I do have a spare you could borrow."

Loona held up her hand in dismissal, trying to turn down the courtesy offered to her; "Nah, I'm good. Thanks for the offer though."

“If you insist,” the elderly woman capitulates as she browses through a page on a desktop computer; “Okay, let’s see here… any specific room you would like?”

Loona shrugs as she rubs her hands together; “No, not really. … No wait— Actually, one with two separate beds would be great.”

“Understood,” the motel owner obliged with a sing-song voice; “Mhmm… Ah! There is one room available for you two; Room Seventeen. If you turn right when you exit and walk down the veranda, you’ll find it about five rooms down,” she goes on to explain, proceeding to acquire a room key from the hook adjacent to the desk clearly labeled with a “17” on a white tag.

“M’kay, got it. How much do I owe you for one night?” Loona inquires, grabbing her wallet from a black backpack she had bought along with her; contained within it along with her other personal belongings was the grimoire.

“That will be eighty dollars, dear,” the old woman says, typing away on the computer to list down that room seventeen was now occupied.

With a price now named, Loona proceeds to grab two yellow fifty-dollar notes out of the depths of her wallet, proceeding to hand them over to the receptionist who politely took the cash out of her new guest’s hands with a gracious “thank you”. After disposing the notes into a till located beside her on the desk, the receptionist hands back a twenty-dollar note as change.

Now that the booking and transaction was out of the way, Loona returned back out onto the veranda to link back up with Jim, who had restored to leaning against the railing with his arms folded, trying to get used to the terribly bitey temperatures.

“Aight, we got a room,” Loona announces as she shows off the keys intertwined in her fingers.

“Uff, finally,” Jim remarks as he shakes wearily from the cold, rubbing his upper arms in an attempt to keep himself warm; “Jeez, it really does get fucken cold as balls down this end..”

Loona raises her eyebrow; “Wait. So you know where we are??”

“Pretty sure I do,” Jim admits with a hint of uncertainty; “If I had to guess, we’re definitely south of Queensland. I’m thinking we’re in Victorian Territory, maybe even Tasmania… Probably explains the temperature, actually.”

“Huh. Never knew it could actually be freezing in Australia,” the hellhound openly admits, shivering from the cold as she begins walking down towards their room, Jim following closely behind; “You think anyone’s gonna recognise you here?”

“Me? No, I don’t think so. Fat chance honestly, I’m not a celebrity,” Jim chuckled, taking in the surroundings which were draped beautifully in the light and patchy morning fog; “If only you could change back to your true form, that fur of yours would do ya wonders.”

Loona smirked; “I don’t want the locals to find out that I’m a hellhound, now do I? That would spell disaster for both of us. Remember how you practically shit yourself when you first found out what I was? Imagine these people finding out…”

“Eheh. That’s a point right there,” Jim agreed with the assumption, at last coming to a stop with Loona in front of a beige door labeled with a small number “17” towards the top of the doorframe; “So this is our place, hey?”

Loona let off a light sigh as she answered; “Sure looks like it.”

The keys rattled briefly in Loona’s hand as she slid the object into the keyhole before turning clockwise, the action of such prompting the door to audibly unlock with a metallic thud. This allowed for Loona to push the door open, at last revealing the appearance of their place of accommodation. Now the room in question wasn’t that large, but nonetheless adequate enough for a temporary stay. In spite of its relatively small size, the contents of the room felt rather busy; a pair of separate beds, a nightstand wedged between both, a large oak closet pressed up against the wall to the right, and a TV squeezed in front of the large curtain-draped window. Off to the far right corner of the room and just out of sight was another closed door, obviously leading into what was the bathroom, at least judging by the marble porcelain tile patterns jutting out from under the door, in direct contrast to the dull, beige carpet of the main room.

A rather coldly critical Loona examined the room with an inspecting eye, obviously judging it’s outwardly clean appearance; “Hmph. I suppose it doesn’t look too crap. Hopefully it’s clean enough.”

“Yeah nah, just watch out for any hidden shitstains,” Jim crudely comments, letting out a brief cackle as he gives his aching joints a stretch.

Loona was visibly grossed out by the comment; “That’s fucking gross! But yeah, let’s hope beyond hope there isn’t. That’s something the motels back home would have…”

“No doubt,” Jim winces as he sits down upon the side of his chosen bed, cracking his knuckles as he does so. At least for now, he young bushman took this considerably tranquil moment to give himself a moment to breathe, a minute to shut his eyes as he sat upright upon the mattre–

“OH WHAT THE FUCK?!?”

Jim’s eyes flew wide open in pure fright, reacting to the sound of Loona’s booming voice echoing from the direction of the bathroom!

“What?! What the hell’s wrong with ya?!” The human bellows right back!

“Come look at this fucking thing!” Loona barks in return, her voice shaking slightly in a sign that she was frightened!

Jim hastily lifted himself off the bed before marching his way into the bathroom, finding Loona — who had suddenly changed back into her hellhound form in her sudden fright — actively avoiding a certain corner of the room, backing herself up near the shower screens.

“Okay, I’m here! Now what’s wrong with… oh you’re joking…”

In all honesty with himself, Jim didn’t know what he expected to find which would startle Loona so terribly, whether it was his “hidden shitstain” prophecy coming true or otherwise; yet he didn’t expect to see what was sitting idly halfway up upon the white wall, directly adjacent to the doorway to his left.

A spider.

“Come on, Loona, ya pulling me leg here. A spider? You nearly fair dinkum gave me a ruddy heart attack over a spider??”

Regardless of Jim’s criticism, Loona was adamant against the specimen on the wall, her ears folded down against her head and her scarlet-red eyes widened; “I don’t give a shit what it is! It gave ME a heart attack! I mean look at it — It’s gross!”

“It’s just a spider!” Jim cackles with a shit-eating grin; “I-I mean come on! It’s half the size of my hand!”

Loona seemed genuinely perplexed; “And you’re not bothered by that??”

The bushman shook his head; “Nup! You wanna come take a closer look?”

“Fuck no!”

“Why not??”

“I’ve had hundreds of them swarm me all at once before; there’s no damn way I’m going near one ever again, especially one that huge!” Loona emphatically explains, rejecting any suggestion of coming into closer contact with the creature; “Just— get it out of here!”

“Alright, no worries,” Jim obliges with a grin, making his way back outside and returning not long after with a wine glass and a slip of paper he found in the closet.

With a careful eye and a steadied hand, Jim positions the glass right over the spider before hastily striking and trapping the spider inside; success! After successfully trapping the “small” intruder, Jim proceeds to slide the slip of paper underneath the glass, sealing the spider firmly inside. The human with the grotesque spider now in his clutches makes his way back outside to presumably release the spider back into the wild, to Loona’s honest relief. The hellhound made a mental note to

herself not to let her wits fail over a stupid spider! In fact, Loona was rather mad with herself, getting freaked out over a pitiful, stupid little thing.

Until…

Jim had finally returned to the confines of the bathroom, this time with a small cloth veiling the wine glass, a wide provocative grin staining his face.

A foreboding pit instantly formed in Loona's stomach; "Uhh.. Jim?"

"Yeah?" Jim's grin grew wider as he slowly approached.

"Jim! No!" Loona began growling, pressing her back up against the wall.

"Someone wants to say hello to ya," the human teasingly remarks, stopping a mere couple of steps away from the hellhound before him.

"No! Nonono! DON'T you dare! Don't you fucking—"

Suddenly Jim lurches forward, chucking the cloth off and lurching the wine glass' contents forward towards Loona, causing the hellhound to lurch back in fright!!

"YELP!!!"

…

Yet Loona felt nothing, looking down at the glass and herself to reveal that the spider was nowhere to be seen.

An enormous fit of cackling, almost maniacal guffawing emanated from Jim who found Loona's reaction to be a complete and utter riot!

The baffled and startled hellhound immediately began scolding the human before her; "You're a fucking asshole!!"

With tears of utter joy and laughter in his eyes, Jim calmed himself down; "O-Oh come on! That was brilliant, ya have to admit! I gotcha pretty bloody good!!"

Loona sneered in annoyance at the human before her, yet she couldn't help but begrudgingly accept humility; "Okay, sure! I'll give you that much! But NEVER do that again, or it may bite you in the ass sometime!"

Jim waved his hand in assurance, still calming down from his laughing episode; "Alright, alright! I promise! Haha–! S-Sorry, I thought that would be funny!"

The humiliated hellhound let out a gruff sigh as she shook her head in disbelief; "Yeah yeah, whatever you say. Haha, so hilarious! Could you get out of here now? I wanna have a shower."

The human gladly obeys his order, proceeding to make his way out of the bathroom before shutting the door behind him, giving Loona some much needed privacy. For the first time in a while, Jim was finally alone to his own devices, deciding to give himself some leeway as he returned to his chosen bed, deciding to slump himself down upon it and rubbing the back of his neck. The all-too familiar sound of the shower turning on confirmed to the young man that Loona was indeed cleaning herself up. The lone human took this as the perfect opportunity to attempt to have a brief snooze for a second time, at long last feeling himself doze off as he lay comfortably upon the pristine mattress.

…

"GRRRR—"

"..Wh— OH FUCKEN' 'ELL—!!"

Jim is startled rudely out of his sleep as the sound of growling loudly reverberates in his left ear, causing him to fall into a terrifying state of shock!! However, his fight-or-flight response is short lived when he finds Loona standing over him to his immediate left with the largest self-satisfied grin on her face, with provocative snickering to compliment the look!

“See? Now we’re even,” the hellhound snickers, now satisfied that the human had now gotten his comeuppance.

The previously sleeping human gave himself a deep sigh of relief, calming himself down after his terrible fright, perhaps regretting having ever attempted to scare his roommate earlier on in the morning.

“Hohh! Uff.. J-Jesus, mate! Give me a heart attack, why don’t you??”

Loona let off a shrug to accompany with her grin; “I might as well! You deserve it,” she teased, proceeding to playfully nudge him in the shoulder; “Anyway I’m done. You wanna head into town at all, see what’s up there?”

“Sounds like an idea,” Jim seriously considered the proposal as he sat himself upright on the bed; “When do ya wanna leave?”

“Next ten minutes maybe? I don’t wanna sit around here all day, it’ll drive me insane,” Loona says; “But first, you seriously need to wash yourself. You haven’t had one in what? Three days now??”

“Heh.. Now there’s another idea,” Jim mumbled with a smirk, once more heaving himself off the mattress before making his way to the bathroom, closing the door behind him as soon as he was inside.

In the meantime, Loona took the opportunity to change back into her human disguise, the radiant blue light consuming her for a moment in time before re-emerging as a human once more.

“I’ll be outside waiting!” Loona calls out towards the bathroom, with Jim’s response being a simple “right you are” before the hellhound turned human makes her way outside onto the veranda, sitting herself down on one of the surprisingly comfortable wooden chairs provided to them.

A soft sigh left Loona's mouth as she began scrolling through her phone, all the while wondering to herself how exactly this miniature getaway would turn out to be.

Finer Points of Hospitality

The grass and scattered gravel crunched and shifted underneath Loona's feet with each long, striding step as she walked alongside Jim, making headway in the westerly direction towards town which was no more than Two Kilometers away, at least according to the kindly old receptionist upon being asked. This distance meant that — to the dismay of both Loona and Jim — they would be required to walk for roughly half an hour to finally reach town, having to unwillingly tolerate the brisk coldness which was carried periodically with the wind. This almost punishing coldness arrived in short bursts through the rolling hills and scattered trees, blowing through the pair of them like a torrent.

Loona cursed to herself as she gritted her teeth, baring the brunt of one of these short bursts of icy winds; "Nngh, shit! D-Dammit, I should've bought that jacket…" she muttered to herself while shivering as she held the black backpack's straps over her shoulders with both hands, the grimoire stored inside as well as her phone and wallet.

"Too late for that now I suppose," Jim replies, feeling the bite just as much as Loona was; "H-Hang on a sec, they could have something for us down here. Maybe something warmer?"

"I sure as hell hope so…" Loona shuddered; "Why didn't you tell me it would be this cold??"

"How would I have known? I don't even know which part of the country we're in," the young man told Loona, keeping his eyes straight forward as they finally rounded the wide sweeping bend, at last seeing the road straighten before them.

In the near distance, a tight accumulation of buildings surrounded the road ahead, signaling that their long-winded walk was near its end. A row of what appeared to be local stores populated both sides of the moderately busy main road ahead.

"Oh finally; civilization! I-I think that's it up ahead," Jim announced his quick observation to the disguised Loona to his immediate right.

Loona felt the same relief that her walking buddy felt, though in a milder, more critical form; "Took us long enough. Huh.. Seems smaller than I expected."

“Ah well. Beggars can’t be choosers, hey?” The young man commented with a smirk, increasing his walking pace to at long last make it into town, eager to rejoin with what was a rough resemblance of his own hometown in relation to its surrounding pleasant environment. Just ahead of them was the beginning of a footpath, the asphalt paving an obvious starting point of where the town proper started. To the immediate left of the established footpath was a sign:

“Welcome to Buckland – “The Stonequarry Town” – est. 1841.”

Just above the white lettering written on the sign was what appeared to be a coat of arms made of metal, painted in blue, red, and gold. Flanking to the left and right of the coat of arms was a depiction of a Lion and a Kangaroo respectively. In an instant, the human knew exactly where the two of them had ended up retreating to.

“Ahhh.. So that’s where we are..” Jim comes to the realization, gesturing his hand up towards the eccentric coat of arms; “New South Wales.”

Loona appeared confused; “Say where now??”

“Well let’s just say that we’re pretty far down south,” Jim goes on to fill Loona in; “I’m not sure where this town is exactly, but I’ve heard of it before; it’s somewhere inland, west of Sydney. I’m more than certain we’re, uhh.. About ten hours away from the Queensland Border? You’ve picked a decent enough spot for us to lie low.”

“I hope so..” Loona mumbled under her breath as the pair of them starting walking further into town, all the while another gust of icy wind taunted the disguised hellhound once more; “Oh for the love of– CAN THIS WIND JUST FUCK OFF ALREADY?!?”

This provoked a cackle from Jim; “HA! It’s nippy out, innit?”

Loona grimaced as she hugged herself against the chill, feeling a hint of relief as they finally reached the long, continuous line of shopfront verandas which provided a smidgeon of warmth; “Ugh! Does it really have to be? I swear I’m about to get frostbite.”

“Don’t freeze on me just yet,” Jim wittingly remarks as they continue walking side by side, walking past a few locals who observed them curiously; “Wait on, there’s a place just up here. Looks like

they’re sellin’ coats, thank Christ..”

The still practically near freezing Loona let out a sigh of relief, a small cloud of condensation flowing out with the exhale; “Oh thank fuck! … You think they’ll have something my style, or is it all just dumb hick shit?”

Jim let off a shrug as they closed in on the open store with an array of articles of clothing displayed outside; “Err.. F-Fucked if I know. What is your style?”

Loona seemed almost incredulous; “You don’t know what my style is.. really? Come on, dude. And you’ve known me for how long now??”

“Well I apologize for not being as observant,” Jim chuckles with a smirk; “It’s an obvious question, come to think of it! You like all that… dark clothing; the mysterious, vantablack, and scarlet red type, hey?”

The disguised hellhound clicked her fingers as she let off a smirk of her own, signaling to Jim that he had guessed correctly; “See? I knew you weren’t that stupid.”

With his quick observation of Loona’s choice of clothing proven correct, Jim reevaluated his earlier answer with regards to the upcoming store’s variety of products; “I’m gonna go out on a limb and say ‘maybe’ they do, but there’s only one way to find out. Wouldn’t hurt for us to have a cheeky squiz anyhow.”

For the second time in the span of two minutes, Loona was once again taken aback; “..To have a what now?”

It appeared as though the question fell on deaf ears, the curious young man making headway towards the store’s entrance, beginning to browse for himself with mild fascination. Loona followed suit, at last reaching the front of this curious shop and looking around keenly for anything which caught her eye. At this point however, Loona couldn’t care less exactly what the style of clothing she wore, as long as it protected her from the punishing chill which lingered without end outside.

That’s when she found it.

The disguised hellhound's eyes glazed over something hanging up on the wall which made her freeze and look back towards the eye-catching article. That 'something' turned out to be a pristine-looking velvety maroon jacket, complete with black cuffs and a black collar. Only serving to pique Loona's interest in the attractive jacket even further was the fact that the inside was covered entirely with silky-smooth wool. With a careful hand, Loona found herself gently taking the jacket off the coathanger it rested on before slipping it on to try it out for size. To her pleasant surprise, the interesting article of clothing fit her perfectly, and furthermore, a look in an adjacent standing mirror at herself proved that it suited her to a beyond faultless degree!

One self-flattery description stood out in her mind; she looked hot.

"Checkin' yourself out, are ya?"

Jim had waltzed over as he analyzed Loona's new clothing choice, a folded brown oilskin coat he had found from his own browsing resting in his left arm.

Loona let off a self-satisfied smirk; "I think I have a right to, thanks. I mean come on, look at this thing! You can't say that I don't look good in this!"

Jim examined the coat which Loona was showing off, raising his brow in mild astonishment; "Err.. Yeah, fair point actually. That's nothing to sneeze at, for sure."

"Right??" Loona then turns her attention to the cashier standing behind the desk; "Hey pipsqueak! How much do I owe you for this thing?"

The young, scrawny, and somewhat inattentive cashier is jolted out of his daydreaming when Loona barks towards him; "O-Oh sh–! Uhh, t-that'll be ninety-five dollars, miss."

A mildly disbelieving look appeared on Loona's face, finding that the claimed sell price seemed like too much of a steal, especially with the perceived quality of the near priceless jacket she wore. If anything, she already began to feel that she owned this endearing jacket; as if it was practically calling out her name!

In what was a move to get further clarity, Loona asked again with a hint of incredulousness; “Y-You’re fucking with me. It’s not, like, two hundred bucks or something wild like that??”

The cashier’s eyes shifted in hesitation of what to say next, looking down at the computer screen to double-check the price, all the while looking and sounding like he was trying his hardest to focus and stay awake; “Uh, n-no ma’am. I’m looking at it now, and yeah. That-That’s the price–”

Before the young cashier could finish his sentence, he is suddenly frightened out of his wits when Loona enthusiastically slammed three fifty-dollar notes on the counter!

THWACK!

“SOLD!!” Loona bellows with a toothy-grinning excitement, before quickly regaining her composure and clearing her throat; “Ahem–! I’m also paying for the “brown rag” this yokel behind me wants – for whatever reason.”

Jim furrowed his brow, staring at his chosen bit of clothing sitting on the counter next to Loona’s far more stylish jacket, before muttering to himself; “It’s not that bad looking, is it?”

Upon overhearing the human’s self-questioning, Loona turns around and pats him firmly on the shoulder; “Relax dude, I’m kidding. It doesn’t look THAT bad, it’s just old fashioned.”

“Hey! As long as it does the job it’s supposed to, I’m happy!” Jim states with a grin while Loona collects the change and the receipt for the purchase.

Loona let out a snicker as she grabbed the clothing off the counter, slipping on her own jacket before handing Jim’s new coat to him; “Whatever you say, ‘Crocodile Dundee’. Here, put it on before you freeze to death. I’m getting frostbite just by looking at you.”

While slipping on his new oilskin coat, Jim softly chuckled which turned into a short burst of chesty laughter; “Hah–HAH!! “Crocodile Dundee”.. that’s a new one from ya! I should give you a name, return the favor!”

Upon hearing this suggestion, Loona froze and shot her eyes towards the human standing before her, folding her arms and raising one eyebrow with an anticipating look; “Yeah? Go on then, hit me.”

“..Y-Yeah nah, maybe not ay,” Jim nervously chuckled, something about Loona’s stance telling him that it was best to leave it be.

Disregarding Jim’s hesitancy, Loona insisted with a smirking grin; “Oh no! No pussying out now! You wanna set a nickname for me? You gotta commit to it. Go on then, humor me; I won’t kill ya.”

“I-I’m not pussying out I promise!” The human stammered with a timid grin; “I’m just being careful with what I say, yanno? I-I just don’t mean to offend ya!”

Loona couldn’t help but snort as she shook her head, proceeding to pat Jim firmly on the back in an assuring motion as they aimlessly paced further down the footpath; “Easy there big guy, I’m only fucking with you! As if I’m actually gonna give you shit! But please, I wanna hear what the nickname was.”

“Y-You really wanna hear it?”

“Yes! That’s why I’m asking!”

“...Mad dog,” Jim finally revealed, albeit in a strained, hushed tone.

A humored, almost disbelieving snicker left Loona’s mouth as she grinned widely; “Pfft-HAH!! “M-Mad dog”? You’d seriously dub me “Mad Dog”??”

“I-I dunno! Maybe??”

While maintaining her humored smirk, Loona slowly nodded her head as they continued walking; “You know what? I’ll let it slide. I’ll allow you to call me “Mad Dog” if it really bugs you to say it. If you were anyone else though, I would’ve punched them straight in the mouth.”

“Hm! That’s oddly reassuring. Cheers for that,” Jim expressed his mild gratitude before deciding to progress the conversation; “Uhh, so.. Yeah, what are we doing here, chief, what’s the plan?”

Loona let off a lost shrug; “I dunno. What do you feel like doing?”

Despite Loona’s question, Jim persisted; “That’s what I’m asking you! Whatcha feel like doin’? You get a choice as well.”

“How kind of you,” the disguised hellhound says in an almost sarcastic tone; “I say we split up for a little while. Take a look around, see if there’s anything interesting.”

Jim nodded his head in agreement to the suggestion; “Sounds like a plan. We’ll go with that then. Got an idea of where we’ll link back up?”

Loona pondered upon the thought for a moment, before she spotted a building at the corner of a nearby intersection; “How about that bar over there? Seems to be open.”

“Yeah, fair enough,” Jim complied with the suggestion.

With the plan now in place, Loona and Jim went their separate ways for the time being, but not before Loona handed over a singular fifty-dollar note for her human companion to spend where he so desired. The disguised hellhound watched on as Jim fled off into the distance, disappearing to the right of the nearby intersection as he strolled aimlessly. Once he was out of sight, Loona decided to take a stroll forwards, deeper into the center of the town to investigate the local surroundings. Other than one or two curious glances towards her from passers-by, the atmosphere of the town was otherwise tranquil and easy-going. Native trees planted along the way towered over both the road and the footpath, providing adequate shade against the hue of the morning sun, the leaves bristling in the bleak winds which so happened to pass through periodically.

Contrary to her assumptions from earlier, the rough center of the town was populated with an array of stores which managed to catch her attention; a few cafes, another clothing store across the road, a store full of old vinyl records and CDs, and so on. The more she walked, the more Loona discovered which caught her mild interest. After a few minutes of walking, the lone “human” spotted a vacant park bench facing away from the road, nestled under one of the large native trees hanging over the ground it was rooted in. Loona immediately saw this as an opportunity to sit

down, which she did so, slumping herself down upon the surprisingly comfortable wooden seat and setting her backpack beside her. To keep herself occupied for the time being, the lone “human” pulled out her phone from the pocket of her new jacket, proceeding to indulge herself with the numbness of scrolling aimlessly.

For the first time that day, Loona began to zone out of her surroundings.

…

“Whatcha got there?”

The sudden sound of a young feminine voice jolts Loona back to reality! She cocks her head to her left to find someone looking towards her; a girl, perhaps no older than beyond her teenage years, dressed in a pair of long beige baggy pants, a green jacket, and a pair of gray and white running shoes; her brunette hair tied into a ponytail.

“C-Can I help you?” Loona stammered in mild confusion, looking towards the girl.

The young girl shrugged before answering sweetly; “Not really! Just seeing who you are is all.”

“Cool,” Loona bluntly replied before turning her gaze back down towards her phone.

In spite of Loona’s obvious disinterest in talking, the girl continued analyzing this newcomer with her deep brown eyes. Eventually after a couple of seconds, the young girl’s continuous gaze was too much for Loona to ignore.

Letting out a gruff sigh, the disguised hellhound looked back up towards the foreign presence; “What? What do you want from me??”

“I like your hair, miss,” the young stranger complimented sincerely; “It looks pretty.”

Loona's eyes shifted as she processed the compliment she had just received; "Oh, uh.. thanks? Okay listen, why are you bothering me?"

The stranger shifted on her feet a little, swaying her arms before holding them behind her back politely; "I dunno, I just thought you looked interesting! You look like someone I could talk to."

The disguised hellhound shook her head; "No. I'm sorry, but you're very wrong. I'm not one for talking, especially with people I don't know."

"You're talking to me right now though," the young girl answered wittingly with a cheeky smile.

"Because I'm forced to," Loona answered bluntly, starting to become very annoyed; "I really don't want to talk to you. In fact, no, I want you to scram. Now, get outta my sight – You're starting to annoy me."

The young stranger's smile began to weaken; "B-But—"

"No!" Loona interrupted abruptly once more, beginning to subconsciously raise her voice a little; "No buts! Get the hell outta here."

In fulfillment to Loona's relief, it appeared as if this rather blunt approach to getting this young intruder to leave proved to work well… perhaps a little too well.

Loona's relief began to turn into mild confusion as the young girl's face began to dim. This was followed by a soft wavering sigh as the brunette-haired stranger began to apologize, a brief glinter in her eyes signaling to Loona that she was about to cry.

"Sorry.. I-I'm sorry," the young formerly inquisitive girl apologized glumly; "I just thought you looked cool and I–... y-you know what? Nevermind. Sorry…"

With this depressive apology over and done with, the young local girl began to wander off in the opposite direction. As she watched on, Loona began to feel a pit in her stomach form, one which echoed a feeling of mild guilt. On one hand, never in her right mind would she be comfortable with

talking to a complete stranger – she vehemently hated talking to people she didn't know, after all! Yet at the same time, in saying this… that was just a young kid she had just upset.

"Nnnngh… Give me a fucking break…"

In a softened and hesitant way, Loona forced herself to call out to the girl; "H-Hey! Wait a minute."

The young stranger stopped in her tracks and turned around to face Loona, that sad look still sitting in her brown eyes.

For a fraction of a second, a hint of hesitancy prevents Loona from speaking any further. Despite the hesitancy, however, she continued; "Listen, kid. I-I'm… dammit, I'm sorry for getting pissed off with you, alright? But what possessed you to start talking to me in the first place?"

The girl let off a shrug; "I don't know, it's just that you look cool. I-I haven't seen someone like you around either, and I like getting to know people sometimes, especially if I'm interested in them."

Loona let off a light smirk which vanished as quickly as it appeared; "You're directly opposite to how I am, believe me. What's so interesting about me?"

The local girl shrugged, her demeanor beginning to brighten a little as she engaged in the conversation she initially yearned for; "Your hair, your eyes, your nails… you look interesting to me, that's all. I don't know how to explain it. I-I really like your jacket, too; it's so pretty!"

"Huh. T-Thanks kid," Loona hesitantly expressed her gratitude; "But yeah, I really don't look like many other people around here, I get that. Don't mind me being shitty though, sometimes I can just be a complete asshole."

The young girl smiled; "That's okay. I wouldn't want a little runt running up to me and asking me random questions either."

“Hey. At least you get my point of view,” Loona states, analyzing the little stranger with indifference; “Seeming that you’ve been asking all these questions, I’ll give you one. What’s your name?”

“O-Oh! I’m Kimberly! A-And yours?”

“Loona.”

Kimberly’s brown eyes twinkled; “Loona? As in, like the moon and all that space stuff??”

Loona shrugged; “I guess.”

A light gasp emanated from the young girl; “That’s so cool! I wish I had a name like that, at least it’s interesting.”

The disguised hellhound raised her eyebrow; “And Kimberly isn’t? I think it’s neat.”

Kimberly let off another brighter smile; “Y-You think so??”

“Sure,” Loona confirmed, deciding to lightly humor the stranger; “You don’t hear that name often. It’s always something like “Alice”, or “Katie”, maybe even a “Georgina”. But a “Kimberly”? It stands out. You’re probably the first person I’ve ever met with a name like that.”

“Aww, thanks miss!” Kimberly thanked sweetly; “Say, you don’t sound very Australian.”

Loona shook her head slowly; “That's because I’m not.”

“Really? Where are you from?”

Now the disguised hellhound was put on the spot, trying to think of a believable lie which would satisfy this otherwise inquisitive girl. Suddenly, the name of a location appeared within the forefront of her mind, giving the answer she was looking for.

“Uh… L-Los Angeles.”

Kimberly became rather fascinated by the name-drop; “That’s in America isn’t it?”

Loona nods hesitantly, hiding the fact that she was lying through her teeth; “Yep. It’s somewhere there.”

The one-girl audience nodded her head slowly, taking the information in; “Huh… Is it as bad as they say it is over there, in Los Angeles?”

This little question caused Loona to snort in amusement; “Trust me, kid, it’s pretty crap. I wouldn’t go back even if someone forced me!”

“Is that why you’re over here?” Kimberly further inquired, becoming more invested into this gothic-looking newcomer before her.

“Partly? I’m just here for a friend of mine, that’s all,” Loona admitted, deciding to finally slip her phone away into her jacket’s front pocket, looking towards this “Kimberly” girl once more. Immediately after finishing her reply, Loona decided to ask another question of her own; “Could you tell me a little about this town? I literally just arrived today.”

Kimberly appeared somewhat jovial by this request; “Sure! W-What would you like to know, miss?”

“Okay first off, you don’t have to call me ‘miss’,” Loona insisted before continuing; “But I don’t know.. any tips you got about the locals? What I can do around here? You know, small town shit like that.”

For a moment, Kimberly gave herself some time to think upon the question, her eyes shifting in thought before finally giving her answer; “Oh, yeah! I mean, there isn’t too much to do around here, mi— uhh, Loona, sorry. We have a few shops, there’s a nice park further down, we’re mostly friendly around here! Just watch out for Richie.”

“Richie?” Loona asked, the warning catching her attention.

“Yeah! He’s the angry town drunk, likes to tick people off whenever he has one too many. Dad says never to look at him or try to challenge him.”

Just as Kimberly finished her elaboration, a masculine voice called her name from down the footpath, growing louder and louder as a man approached; “Kimberly! Kimber!! W-Where are you, girl??”

The young stranger shot her head towards the fast approaching figure; “I’m over here, dad!”

Jogging up towards both Loona and the young local stranger was obviously Kimberly’s father; a brunette-haired man who was shorter in stature but with a decent enough muscular density in his arms and legs. He wore a fluro-orange work-shirt and a pair of work trousers, a pair of beige, weathered steel-toed boots worn on his feet. A rather thick-bristled mustache sat prominent above his lip, well-combed and looked after.

“Bloody Norah, Kimberly! Whatcha doin’ running off on me like that?” The concerned father exclaimed as he finally caught up, catching his breath after the run. If anything, the man seemed more relieved and concerned than annoyed.

Kimberly grimaced slightly as a sign of her guilt; “Sorry, dad. I-I was just—”

“Nevermind sorry, Kimber, as long as you’re alright,” the father reassured with a sigh before turning his eyes towards Loona; “Sorry about my kid, mate! She’s a very extroverted fourteen-year-old and talks to anyone she can. Full of beans, even!”

In spite of her initial annoyance towards the young local girl’s intrusion in her time alone, Loona gave a dismissive gesture towards the apology; “Don’t worry about it, she’s fine. You’ve got a good kid there, by the way.”

“H-Heh. That she is,” the man chuckled before leading Kimberly back down the footpath from where he came; “Come on now, your mother’s waiting for ya.”

A simple nod of compliance from the young stranger was given to her paternal figure as they walked together side by side, but not before she glanced behind her to get a good look at the gothic-looking newcomer to the town, giving her a wave of farewell; “See ya, Miss Loona! Hope you enjoy it here!” She called out cheerfully.

Loona decided to return the gesture by giving Kimberly a two-fingered wave of farewell, sending the young stranger off with her father, watching them disappear into the distance. To her overall relief, Loona was once again left to her own devices, sitting alone once more under the comforting shade of the large, overhanging tree above her. With not much else to do other than loiter around, Loona began thinking on what to keep herself occupied with in this otherwise mundane town. It didn’t take long for a solution to appear within her mind, the disguised hellhound pivoting around on the bench to face back towards the pub on the intersection, the doors wide open and practically calling her name.

Fuck it, this calls for a drink.

Loona picks herself up from the bench and retrieves her backpack, slinging it back over her shoulders as she takes the short walk back to the four-way intersection where the pub stood. Sure enough, to her direct opposite left across the road was the corner pub named “The Lord Dunwich Hotel”, standing as firm as the stone it was built upon. The corner building in question wasn’t anything too grand; just a Victorian two-storey red brick structure with an upper floor balcony which stretched broadly across the facade, the bottom floor provided with a more-than-adequate veranda against the sun’s hue. From her point of view standing at the level crossing, Loona could now see the wide-open entrance in full view, the double doors bolted back and beckoning for the tempted potential customer to come inside.

The newest customer to the pub didn’t need to be told twice as she strided across the temporarily vacant road, making a beeline straight towards the entrance and heading inside. Loona stepped inside to find that, much like the exterior of the establishment, the interior was nothing that special either; Just a moderately spacious, off-white painted room with doorways both left and right leading to other sections of the building. Off to both her immediate left and right, positioned next to the old-fashioned windows, were an array of neatly spaced tables and chairs, a light gleam illuminating off the surface in a sign they had just been cleaned. In her direct line of sight was the bar itself, the entire structure being made of a remarkable, varnished dark oak which glowed with the yellowish incandescent bulbs shining above on ancient cast brass chandeliers. Standing behind the bar and leaning lazily over the counter was the bartender; a younger man, most likely in his mid

to late twenties, wearing a simple smart casual outfit which consisted of a dark green and black-collared polo shirt and a pair of black trousers.

It didn't take a second for the lone bartender to notice Loona, picking himself upright before speaking; "Morning. What can I do for you?"

Loona paced up to the bar, her eyes glazing over the displayed bottles of alcohol; "Just a drink."

"Anything you're after specifically?"

"Got anything with a bit of a kick?" Loona inquired, currently indecisive with her choice of poison.

"Umm.. I might've," the relatively young barman grumbled, turning around to intently browse the displayed bottles for himself; "Aight, let's see– I've got… I've got Whiskey, Rum.. uh– Spirits, Brandy we've just run out of… Got no Gin either. So yeah, just Whiskey, Rum, and Spirits at the moment."

Loona shrugged; "Aight, cool. What's the best Rum you have?"

The barman broke a grin, beginning to lightly boast about his apparent selection; "If you're looking to pay a little bit extra and try something new, we've got Rum Solera and Royal Liqueur. It's that good, flavored poison."

The disguised hellhound cocked her head slightly, somewhat intrigued; "I'm hearing ya."

Abiding by Loona's indirect insistence that he continue, the barman elaborated; "At the moment here, we've only got two flavors; "Salted Caramel", and "Coffee & Chocolate". Either that, or you could always go plain, maybe add a splash of cola?"

Now Loona's interest had truly piqued, seriously giving thought to the two limited options she had.

“Hm. Fuck it, hit me up with that Salted Caramel,” Loona finally ordered as she pulled out ten dollars for the drink.

The barman didn’t say another word, taking the money off his customer’s hands before immediately getting to work. He grabbed a short glass from underneath the counter, pouring a few cubes of ice into it before grabbing the Salted Caramel flavored Rum, pouring it until the glass was three-quarters full. With the customer’s concoction now ready, the clearly experienced barman slid the glass towards Loona, who expressed her gratitude with a simple “thanks” before grabbing it. Loona looks down at the contents of her serving with a keen eye, watching it shift side to side as she delicately swirls the glass deliberately. In a careful manner, she raises the glass to her mouth before sipping the contents, immediately tasting the rich flavor, immediately discovering that the liquor in her hand tasted exactly as advertised. An intense shiver shot through Loona’s body as the alcohol moved through her system!

“Uff– ACK! S-SHIT! Damn, that’s intense!” Loona exclaims with a light couch as she sets the icy glass down, trying to process the sheer strength of her serving!

The barman reacted with a snickering grin; “Sure is! That’s probably the strongest thing we’ve got at the moment next to methanol.”

Loona looked down towards the drink set down on the bar top; “Huh. No kidding. … It’s very quiet at the moment.”

“Ah, well,” the bartender went on to explain, shuffling a few glasses around in order to keep himself occupied; “It’s not as if day-drinkers are common in this town – only you, I suppose. … Speaking of, I can't say I’ve seen your face around here before.”

“I only just arrived this morning,” Loona explains; “Just staying for the day and then I’ll head back home. I’m only here for a friend.”

Loona’s temporary one-man audience gave a brief nod; “Fair ‘nuff. You're both tourists, are ya?”

The gothic stranger shrugs with an awkward nod; “Y-Yeah. I guess you could call us that. Though he’s from this country, I’m not.”

“I figured as much by the accent,” the barman chuckled; “American?”

“Sure,” Loona simply replies, glancing back down towards her serving of Rum as she takes another sip. A moment of silence is shared between the apparent owner of this quiet pub and its lone customer before the silence is gently interrupted once more.

“Mmm!” Loona vocalizes as she takes another sip of Rum before swallowing, allowing herself to speak without obstruction; “Ahem! So, you own this joint?”

“Fair dinkum I do,” The barman stated proudly.

His lone customer appeared mildly surprised by this revelation; “Wow. You seem very young to own a place like this, huh?”

“Inheritance is a hell of a thing, innit? Family’s owned this pub for seven generations now, ever since it opened, uhh.. Good Lord knows how long ago,” the now apparent owner goes on to rant, obviously not ashamed to tell the facts exactly as they were; “We’ve been here since before this country federalized in Nineteen-Hundred-And-One! The Conaghers, we were known as – we still are to this day.”

“Aight,” Loona replies in a monotone fashion, not finding much interest in anything else except her drink.

A profoundly suppressive silence filled the largely vacant pub once more, the only sound being the gentle clicking of the ice cubes against Loona’s glass, the contents of which depleted by a quarter since the disguised hellhound began drinking. This near trancing silence lasted for a good further couple of minutes, the bartender going about his business while Loona’s mind wandered off.

The tranquil quiet was only broken once more when the young bartender’s voice sounded off loudly, causing Loona to abruptly snap out of her daydreaming.

“Oh, Ted! Mornin’ to ya.”

“Yeah yeah, how’s it going Clement?”

“Ah you know, I’m getting there. Are you coming to join us?”

“Fair dinkum!”

Loona briefly turned herself around to get a glimpse of the apparent newcomer ready to join her and the bartender. The aforementioned newcomer was a graying elderly man wearing a worn gray akubra hat, complete with a black work shirt and beige trousers. His polished and well-kept brogue shoes shuffled against the floorboards which must’ve seen many shoes going back decades, perhaps even a century or two.

The second customer of the day picked himself a barstool, one which was two seats away from Loona, before heaving himself up onto it and making himself comfortable with a tired grunt. After making himself acquainted with his sitting position, he turned his charismatic old brown eyes towards the bartender.

“I’ll have the usual this morn’, boss,” the newest customer ordered, the bartender wasting no time at all to fulfill the old man’s request.

It turned out that the “usual” for this old man was a short glass of Premium Whiskey on “The Rocks”, a beverage which the requester handled cautiously in the grip of his weather-beaten hands. After swallowing his first sip of alcoholic beverage down, he turns his gaze curiously over to the young woman sitting to his left, looking at her with mundane curiosity.

“Who’s this grass snake?”

Loona promptly shot the elderly man with a cold, stern side-eye, keeping her head as rigid as possible in an effort to ignore the attention unwillingly being drawn to her.

“Just a new customer, Ted, new to town. Passing through, she tells me,” the bartender informed the regular while storing the used bottles back up on their shelf.

The elderly regular to the pub in question nodded his head, turning back towards the stranger to try and engage her in conversation; “You familiar with the town here, champ?”

Loona doesn’t respond, ignoring the question while taking another quick swig of her drink.

Regardless of Loona’s outward posture, the aged man persists with his attempt at hospitality; “I see. Not much of a talker, Ay?”

“No shit, Sherlock. Filthy old creep…” Loona mumbles in a harsh whisper, subtly rolling her eyes.

Although this disparaging comment was meant to be kept secret, it was soon obvious that the fellow patron had heard it thanks to the echoing acoustics of the room. Instead of acting in an insulted manner, the elderly gentleman instead let out a wheezing cackle, as if he had been thoroughly humored by Loona’s reclusive and surly attitude! Loona gave a confused glance towards the bartender. The same look of confusion on the bartender’s face proved to Loona that the feeling of confusion was mutual.

“H-HAH!!– L-Listen, lady!” The weather-beaten patron wheezed, coming out of his short burst of laughter; “There’s no such thing as a stranger at a little bar like this! We’re all mates here, I assure ya.”

Loona glanced back over towards the eccentric old man to her right, shooting him another judgmental, squinting side-eye, his choice of words making her even more suspicious; “Are you.. trying something on me? Is that what this is, some kind of perverted charade??”

An attempt at de-escalation was made when the male patron waved his hand in a dismissive gesture as he took a sip of his drink; “There’s no charades here, I promise ya! I’m just an eccentric ol’ bastard, don’t mind me. Just tryna raise conversation, yanno? Heh. Worst thing next to a chronic moocher is a quiet bar!”

Loona chose not to react to the word of encouragement. Instead, she maintained her critical side-eye before answering with indifference, her voice low and cynical and her brow furrowed; “Whatever you say.”

The more-than-willing talker set his drink down and finally took off his dust-ridden hat, setting it down upon the varnish bar top before asking; “So! You’se a yank?”

The disguised hellhound froze mid swig; “A what now?”

“He’s asking if you’re American,” the bartender half-whispers.

The third time. This was the third time Loona had been asked this exact same question in the past ten minutes, and frankly, she was already beyond sick of it.

Loona grimaced at having to hear the question again, pinching her fingers between her eyes; “Oh my fucking— Fine, yes! Yes I am! I’m a star-spangled, gun-toting, red white and blue goddamn American! And let me guess; you could tell by the accent?”

“I ain’t sayin’ nothin’,” the old man wittingly replied with a wrinkled smirk while stirring his glass, mildly amused by the female patron’s sudden outburst.

Loona let out a guttural sigh of disbelief, shaking her head and swallowing down another morsel of that caramel-flavored rum resting in her hand. She cautiously analyzed both the bartender and especially the fellow patron to her immediate right, somewhat judging their every move and running an internal dialogue about them. While, yes, the constant questioning about Loona’s origins was disruptive in her attempts to wind down, it wasn’t as if they were doing anything particularly “wrong”, at least just yet; she just wasn’t one to engage in lengthy discussion with complete strangers, hence her abruptness. At least they were something “interesting” to look at, Loona considered as she scratched her left cheek. In another upside, a more subtly optimistic side to her — which rarely showed — noted that no form of trouble had emerged so far, improving her mood by a considerable margin. Maybe this day would go smoothly, without much excitement occurring.

Or so she thought.

“Oh for Pete’s sake, here we go…”

The disguised hellhound picked up the barman’s voice mumbling to himself, causing her to look up towards him. To her mild confusion, his face wore a fatigued expression as if he was anticipating

something inconvenient, his eyes fixed towards the entrance doors.

It was Loona's turn to ask questions; "You good there?"

"Give me a moment," the pub owner mumbled before turning his attention back towards the entrance; "Christ sake, Richie! I've told you once and I'll tell you again; I'm not serving you."

Richie?

A slightly foreboding pit in Loona's stomach formed upon hearing the name, prompting her to turn around and investigate for herself who exactly had arrived. Sure enough, there stood a thin individual; a blonde-haired man, who appeared to be around Loona's own age, dressed in casual clothing with a face which could be described as the physical embodiment of the word "insufferable". Just above his top lip was the most pathetic example of "facial hair" that Loona had ever seen. Upon seeing the newest visitor to this quaint bar, the feeling went from that of mild concern to that of confusion, finding that this "Richie" individual was nothing all that special.

"'Mon then! Get outta here!" The barman barked out towards the blonde individual once more, phrasing it as a strict order.

Richie gave off a wry grin; "And why should I, chief?"

The young barman was having none of it, obviously in no mood for Richie's antics; "'Cause I told you so, dickhead. Now bugger off."

While maintaining his irritating half-grin, Richie begins walking towards the bar itself; "Yeah nah, I think I'm in my right to come in, thank you very much. So you'd serve these two… fuckwits here, but not me? That's bad for business, innit?"

"I choose who I bloody well serve. I don't need to explain anything to you," the barman firmly states, jabbing a firm hand towards the unwelcome arrival; "We've had this discussion many times. Get out of my joint, or I'll dim ya!"

It was quickly becoming quite apparent to Loona that this “Richie” guy obviously had an attitude problem. She watched on as the new presence slyly wandered his way up to the bar, strutting across the floorboards in an obnoxiously self-important fashion. His provocative eyes met with the weary old man, who by this time was staring down at the contents of his glass, wanting to be unscathed of what may come.

This effort was ultimately futile as Richie began taunting the old patron; “Still drinking your past sorrows away, Teddie?”

“Ted” continued to stare down at his drink as he growled, his old and weather-beaten brow furrowed; “You best shut your mouth right away, you little blonde bastard.”

Loona watched on intently, her eyes carefully shifting between the provocateur and his victim, a bad feeling beginning to arise of what may come of the situation.

Regardless, Richie continued with his needless provocation; “Yeah? Why should I? You’re the one who’s always sulking about “What you saw in that jungle” and whatever-the-fuck. We’ve all had a hard life, Ted, but you don’t hear us whining about it… like with you and how you saw your brother die over in Viet–”

Suddenly, Ted shot up from his seat with sheer anger plastered on his face! He spins right around to stare Richie down with murder in his weary eyes, staring at the young troublemaker as if he was about to kill him!

“I watched my own brother bleed out all over the mud of that godforsaken jungle, and there was NOTHING I could do about it!!” Ted growled ferociously through gritted teeth, getting right up into Richie’s face with a crooked finger pointing upwards; “You wouldn’t know what that bloody well feels like!!”

“Nah you’re right!” Richie nods with an infuriating grin; “I wouldn’t know what that feels like – Because I’m not weak-minded like you!”

The barman slammed his fist down hard upon the bar top, causing Loona to jump; “DAMMIT RICHIE, GET OUTTA MY PUB!!”

So far to Loona's honest surprise, she hadn't been the target of this relentless harassment being reigned down upon the people around her, despite being right in the middle of it. This was perhaps due to her actively avoiding the situation, hiding herself away in plain sight with her back turned towards the commotion. Unfortunately for Loona, this luck finally ran out when Richie's searching eyes fixated upon her.

The blonde young man's smirk grew ever wider upon seeing her gothic, eccentric appearance; "And who's this little slut sittin' here..?"

A sudden flurry of anger arose within Loona like a small spark, yet perhaps for her own sanity's sake, she chose not to react… for the time being; she would have to wait for the right moment to even consider retaliation. The purpose of being up in the human world in the first place was to relax and lie low for one day; not to lash out at some incessant, out-of-line lout with behavioral problems. Besides, Loona didn't want to be arrested again, replicating her time at the watch-house in Jim's hometown the month prior.

If she wanted the satisfaction of giving this "Richie" what he deserved, she'd have to be methodical about it.

Richie's nagging voice rang out once more from behind Loona; "Wanna turn around for me, love?"

"I'm not your "love", dickweed," Loona coldly replied, her voice firm and unwavering.

The provocateur gave off a mocking chuckle which grated Loona's ears; "Ooooo-Ho-ho-hohoho… Look atcha! Feisty little dame, huh?"

"At the best of times? Sure." Loona bluntly affirmed, taking another swig of her drink and keeping her anger at bay — for now.

"Yanno… I look for that in women. I like them with a bitta "fight" in them. They're few and far between, but they sure are a catch," Richie taunted, his grin thinning across his face; "Would you… be one of them outliers, luvvy~?"

For whatever reason, the troublemaker had suddenly changed his tact to become flirtatious, obviously trying to act chauvinistic. Of course, Loona knew exactly what Richie was up to,

knowing as well that if she played along, that then could allow an opportunity to “make her move” to appear.

Richie wanted to flirt? Sure — Loona could play that game.

In a deliberate and smooth manner, Loona pivots herself around on the bar stool to meet face-to-face with Richie. Somehow this pathetic individual standing before Loona looked far worse in outward appearances than how he looked at first glance, his irritating appearance making her cringe internally. Regardless of this factor, the disguised hellhound persisted with her plan.

Loona broke a deliberately flirtatious smile, peeking at him shyly; “Maybe I am, maybe I’m not. But what’s it to you? I’m just a “slut” to you, aren’t I?”

The insufferable provocateur blinked for a moment, perhaps surprised that his advancements had “worked”, whether intentional or not. For whatever reason, the young lout decided to continue his “seductive” charade.

“Only if you can prove to me otherwise, doll~,” Richie flirted in his voice which reeked of putrid sleaze, looking Loona up and down; “Shit, look atcha.. a pretty emo little thing, hey? Would love to see ya have a “Chinese feed” on my “Spring Roll”, that’s for sure.”

Loona felt herself become downright disgusted by this suggestive comment, knowing exactly what he meant by the innuendo, though she tried her hardest not to show it outwardly.

“You can have me in any way you’d like, big guy. But first, I gotta figure out what I’m working with~. Stand still for me~,” Loona coos, beginning to slowly strut around the revoltingly sleazy specimen before her.

At last, her opportunity to finally make her move was fast approaching, her fake flirting smile gradually becoming more of a plotting grin as she left his direct line of sight, rounding up behind him.

Wait for it…

Almost there…

…

NOW!

Loona forcefully roundhouse kicks the back of both of Richie's legs with brute strength, throwing him completely off balance! This move sends the off-putting son-of-a-bitch lurching forward, causing his legs to cave in before he careened right into the dark oak Bar Wall, his face making painfully blunt contact!

T HUD!

<u>CRACK!!</u>

"ARGH— NFFF! CHRIST!! Argh! .. M-My nose! My bloody nose!!"

A wide, provocative grin of Loona's own sat firmly on her face, looking down at the crumpled moron on the floor. To add insult to injury, she spoke down towards the pervert to humiliate him even further.

"What's the matter, fuckface?! Did you forget I'm feisty??" The disguised hellhound taunts before kicking Richie in the side of his stomach, causing him to whine louder!

Loud, enthusiastic cackling and applause came from the elderly patron who found this turn of events to be an utter riot; "Serves you right, ya little rodent! Always knew you'd be belted sooner or sooner!"

Richie stumbled back into his feet with a pained whimper, cupping his hands around his now bloodied nose! Contrary to his demeanor mere minutes earlier, he was now reduced to a ridiculous, humiliated mess. The barman, the elderly drinker, and Loona all collectively ridiculed the "town drunk" with mocking grins and smirks in varying degrees of severity, with Loona's snickering and "Ted's" reverberating laughter being the most impactful of all.

“Y-..Y-You’re a psychotic bitch! You’re sick, playing with a man’s emotions like that then breaking his nose!” Richie bellowed nasally through his now bruised nose stained with blood, wincing in pain once more.

Loona wasted no time at all coming up with a scathing response; “As if I give a fuck! That’s what you get for being a perverted sicko. Now get outta here before I carve you a new asshole!”

“You heard the woman,” the barman smirked with a booming voice, throwing a shooing gesture; “Move it! And don’t think of going to the rozzers, as if they’d listen to your sorry arse!”

Richie froze exactly where he stood, unsure of his next move in such a disadvantaged situation. Eventually, after letting out a throaty growl in extreme agitation, the aggressor stormed out in humiliation, all the while containing the blood that had accumulated in his hands. Just before Richie could step outside, he stops, standing in front of the doorway. He turns back around to face Loona, staring at her with murder in his eye. With one hand holding his bloodied nose and the other raised to point towards the woman who had outsmarted him, Richie makes one final closing statement.

“Mark my words, cunt.. If I see your pale little face again, I’ll fucken smack ya black and blue!” he growls, trying his best to make himself look and sound intimidating.

Loona rolled her eyes heavily; “Yeah? Go sit on a dick, how’s that? Go on! Haul your pathetic ass home!”

Without saying another word, the provocateur finally leaves, leaving nothing but a dusty imprint of his sorry face on the surface of the Bar Wall.

With that spontaneous episode now out of the way, Loona returned to her bar stool, sitting back down with a smug look on her face, returning to finish her serving of rum. In a sense of mild awe, the bartender and the second patron stare in Loona’s direction, baffled that the stranger had been able to face up against the man who had tormented them for who knows how long.

At long last, Loona was granted the gift of a quiet drink to herself… or so she thought.

“Ted” had decided to pipe up once more; “Ey lady, sorry to bother you, but I have a question.”

Loona sighed in defeat, feeling as if she would never have a moment to herself; “Not like I’ve got much of a choice. Ask away.”

“How’d ya learn to do that? As in, lure him in, and then strike him with his guard down like that?”

The disguised hellhound stared at the fellow patron with a blank expression before smirking; “I’ve got my ways.”

“Right…” the old patron processed the answer, before asking one final follow-up question; “Ya reckon you’ll fight him again?”

“If I have to? Sure.”

And with that, a comforting silence fell upon the bar, the only sound being the ambience of the world outside and the soft clinking of the bartender manually washing each glass individually. The last drops of Loona’s initial serving slid down her throat, marking the end of her much savored rum. For a few seconds, the undercover hellhound considered having another smaller shot of alcohol “for the road” before she left to check up on Jim.

A consideration which Loona acted upon, pulling out another couple of dollars out of her wallet; “Hey. Give me another round, would you?”

Visits and Loose Ends

Decisions, decisions…

To post, or not to post? That is the question.

Somewhere within the far richer districts of Imp City, within her spacious bedroom illuminated by moody pink strip lighting, Verosika sat alone within the serene comfort of her luxurious private apartment, lounging snugly upon an immaculate maroon sofa which was almost indescribably soft to the touch. The succubus dressed in her fluffy, pink nightgown lay lengthways upon the opulent piece of furniture with her legs crossed over one another, lounging lazily as she glared at the contents of her phone screen. The contents in question was the draft of a post to her sinstagram, which read the following:

"Found out today that I.M.P. has decided to start keeping HUMANS as pets!

That hellhound receptionist has taken an interest in protecting and keeping one. Don't ask me why.

Oh well, at least he looks cute! <3

Probably unwashed tho LOL"

The solitary entertainer let out a smug, muffled snicker, reading over the string of words which would no doubt cause widespread and impactful controversy against her ex-lover, Blitz. Throughout the mid-to-late hours of that afternoon, Verosika's mind was occupied with blissful thoughts of the sweet, glorious revenge she could exact upon that certain overzealous imp, through the simple means of "spreading the word". It was almost too perfect, almost too good to be true; there was a living, breathing human under I.M.P.'s direct protection, and if there was one thing for certain, the idea of a human residing in this realm was no light matter, and one which carried serious consequences for everyone directly involved!

Verosika could already picture the media headlines, causing her to grin maliciously:

“Imp asshole found smuggling humans!”

“Self-Proclaimed “Assassin” gives mercy to mere weaklings!”

“Legitimate Business or Complete Fraud? The case of IMP and their human-protecting tendencies!”

No matter how many times she pictured the damage that could be done against Blitz, an ecstatic feeling of schadenfreude arose within her to an almost overwhelming degree. This situation? This surreal, bizarre turn of events? It was almost too perfectly disastrous for that pathetic imp to be true! And to top it all off like a cherry atop a perfectly baked cake, it was all thanks to that drunkard, simplistic receptionist who Blitz called a daughter! If anything, Verosika felt powerful with the information she currently withheld, exceedingly confident that she could bring forth life-destroying karma to her self-important Ex with just a simple click of a button!

“M-hmhm! Oh Blitzo, you pindicked moron..” Verosika wryly muttered to herself with a suppressed, evil chuckle, her conniving grin only growing ever wider.

At last, the succubus’ mind was finally made up; she was going to publish the entire post in full for the whole world to see. Her finger hovered over the “post” button below the four short yet damning paragraphs of text, threatening to send it into the vast algorithm at a millisecond’s notice. Soon everyone would know the fraud that was Blitz and his sad, sorry excuse of a ponzi scheme which he called a “business”. He wanted attention drawn to his business? Sure; Verosika would most certainly provide the attention which that pitiful imp so craved.

Blitz wanted notoriety? He would get notoriety…

…

You know what? No. Verosika wasn’t going to post it just yet.

She had all the time in the evening to post it; why would she rush? Why not build up the suspense; the anticipation for that most terrible bombshell to drop? A cocky half-smile appeared on the solitary pop-star’s face, her eyes gravitating towards a nightstand pressed up against the wall to the right of her queen-sized bed.

Laying on top the surface of this nightstand was a gorgeous, purple-tinted glass bottle of sweet, buttery chardonnay, accompanied by a tall and slender wine glass neatly positioned to its immediate right. The gracefully slim container of delightfully tempting alcohol stood prominently, practically calling out to Verosika to come over and pour herself a generous serving of its expensive contents all in the name of “celebration”.

Verosika was temporarily indecisive; should she treat herself? Should she celebrate her momentous victory over that spiteful little imp over a succulent serving of the best wine currently in the market? Was it a fitting occasion for such a perfectly fermented and crafted bottle of deliciously tasteful wine?

…

You know what? Of course she should. Why the hell wouldn’t she?

Not even for a moment, Verosika never took her eyes off that tempting bottle of wine as she picked herself up from the couch, proceeding to make a swift beeline straight to the nightstand where the expensive drink awaited her. With her left hand delicately cupping the bowl of the glass and her right gripping the wine bottle, she rips open the cork with her teeth with a loud “pop!” before carefully pouring herself the appetizing alcohol contained within. Verosika stops pouring once the glass was roughly a quarter full, promptly returning the wine bottle to the nightstand and returning to her spot on her prestigious sofa.

The succubus gently sat herself back down amidst the cushions, propping herself up against the armrest before finally consuming a slither of that sweet buttery wine. Almost immediately after the numbingly satisfying liquid touched her lips, a chilling, almost numbing shudder of satisfaction ran through her body in reaction to the sheer bitterness it possessed. In contrast to the initial bitter sensation, the aftertaste was prominently sweet with an almost buttery texture.

Bitter, yet sweet; much like the revenge she would deliver not too long after her—

KNOCK! — KNOCK! — KNOCK! — KNOCK!

Verosika’s heart skips a beat to the startling sound of reverberating knocking against her bedroom door, each booming knock sending an alarming shudder through the walls! The startled succubus

shot herself upright, spinning right around to stare wide-eyed at the entrance door to the leftmost corner of the room. With her attention firmly fixated upon the entrance door, Verosika began to wonder who exactly the visitor could be.

Was it anyone she knew? Of course it had to be. This was her private apartment, after all!

But who exactly? Could it have been Josh? Maybe Vortex? ... No, it couldn't have been; Josh had gone home hours ago, and Vortex was on leave for a few days.

Was it one of her other security guards, perhaps?

The more Verosika thought about who the visitor could've been, the more she began to feel apprehensive, a nervous suspicion beginning to grow within her startled and confused mind. Amidst the thoughts of confusion, the lone succubus couldn't help but feel perturbed, as if something foreboding was about to occur. That's when she also noticed the faint tinnitus ringing softly within her ears, the sound of which was light yet strangely oppressive, as if the sound paralyzed her in fear.

After a few seconds which felt almost like an eternity, Verosika finally called out.

"W-Who is it??"

…

With an ever-so-brief moment of suspenseful delay, the bedroom door begins to open in a deliberate and slow manner, as if the individual on the other side was purposefully acting in a way to intimidate the bedroom's lone occupant. The metallic freaking of the door's hinges whined until the door was just enough ajar for… a white cloth?

Verosika's perturbed state turned into a hint of confusion as a torn white cloth poked its way through the half-opened door; a clear sign that whoever held the object meant "no harm". The white cloth hung in the air for a silent few seconds extra until a gruff, croaky voice sounded off, clearly addressing the pop star.

“Can I come in? I’m not meanin’ to harm ya.”

This very unfamiliar and deeply unsettling voice sent a chill up Verosika’s spine, causing her to shoot herself up onto her feet in a fight-or-flight response, all the while continuing to stare wide-eyed at the door!

“Who the fuck are you? H-How did you get past security??”

“Don’t worry about that, luv’; I’ve got my ways,” the rough, deep, sandpaper-like voice replied in an uninviting fashion.

By this point, Verosika’s feeling of genuine fright turns into that of anger and frustration. Who was this person anyway? Who was he to intrude in her own private time, especially at such a perfect moment??

“Listen here, asshole! I need you to get the fuck out of my apartment RIGHT NOW!” Verosika boomed, her face clearly displaying an angered defensive look, her brow fiercely furrowed in dismay at this most inconvenient situation; “You better show your ugly face, o-or I’ll come over and.. a-and beat your hideous face in!”

A low guttural, phlegmish chuckle echoed from just behind the door, the culprit of the noise a few mere inches out of sight; “Fat chance you’d manage that, girlie.”

That’s when he started emerging, the torn white cloth being lowered as a tall, large, and unsettlingly abnormal figure dressed in a shabby, grimey, brown great coat pushed the door wide open, the intruder revealing himself in all of his disgustingly rotten “splendor”.

Bile began to rise up within Verosika’s throat as a potently foul stench filled the room – the smell of death; of rot; of decay. Her eyes widened in shock as to what exactly had stepped into the inner boundaries of her bedroom, the rotten-looking sinner immediately contrasting the vibrant, luxurious room which he stood within. Upon closer inspection, it was a small wonder as to why the smell of a rotten carcass had filled the room, as the stranger before Verosika looked like a living corpse, defying all expectations of what something “alive” should look like. Truly, he looked “undead”; as if the state of his corpse in the living realm had been reflected in this realm he resided within.

Verosika was left utterly speechless, glaring at the intruder with a look of confusion and fear; “I… Wh–… W-Who the fuck are–”

“Shouldn’t really matter who I am. I’m just here to have a chat with ya,” the grotesque sinner spoke in his hoarse, strained voice; “Don’t try to call for anyone; your bouncers don’t know I’m here and I’ve cut the phone lines. Internet service is also gone, so don’t try callin’. That’ll only make things that bit worse for ya.”

The succubus stood motionless, paralyzed by fear and perplexion, her attention paid fully to the sinner who had just borderline threatened her.

In Verosika’s continuing state of stunned silence, the sinner continued, gesturing his hand towards the piece of furniture to the succubus’ left; “Sit down, back in that couch. Not gonna do anything to ya, we’re all civil here.”

The fearful pop star remained stagnant, only able to utter a few unfinished words; “Wh… H-How… Who are–”

The intruder was having none of this, his voice giving off a hint of vitriol; “You better do what I say.”

“… W-What is th—”

“***AH—!*** Shut your mouth and sit the fuck ***down!***”

With no other clear choice left, Verosika abided by the strict order, sitting herself upright back down on the couch, staring apprehensive towards the sinner as his de-facto captive.

The sinner huffed before giving off a wheezing breath; “H-Hm.. That’s much better. Now! Let’s talk. … I gotta say, Verosika, you’ve got a.. bloody gorgeous place here. Best that money can buy… Bloody Norah— and is that a bottle of wine I see?”

Verosika's eyes darted between the wine bottle resting on the surface of the nightstand before immediately looking back towards the odious sinner, giving him a rigid and forced nod.

The sinner slowly wanders over to the nightstand, his worn, dusty shoes thudding heavily with each footfall as he paces. It didn't take him long to grab the appetizing bottle, grabbing it by the neck and taking a long, hefty swig while tipping his decaying head backwards, proceeding to drink as if the alcohol now in his possession was water. After a couple of seconds of drinking the intruder gasps heavily, his breath rattling with what sounded like fluid, the sound of which made Verosika sick to her stomach.

"***GAH!*** Uff— Shoot! That's some strong stuff, innit? Heheh.. Argh— The good stuff…" The sinner's vantablack and sickly yellow eyes turned back towards the deeply concerned Verosika, cracking his jaw in a nauseating manner before speaking once more, his voice low and growling; "I'll get straight to the point with you, doll; you've got something you're meant to be telling me…"

Verosika swallowed with her dry throat, deciding to answer; "W-Which is?"

"You know something you're not meant to know about," the sinner explained; "A bloke, who's down here with us, when he's not meant to be… you met him today, I know you did."

The succubus felt even more weak and afraid as these words were spoken, writhing anxiously in the couch, a deeply nervous pit in her stomach forming like an endless void.

"I know a great many things, woman," the sinner growled sternly yet quietly; "A great many things. I know about that "Blitz" man, I know about how… h-how he broke your heart. I know what that feels like, I suppose. Or maybe not. … Though one thing I've never gotten, out of the many things I know, is this; why do people who.. have very sensitive information, which they have no business knowing, tend to blab on about it? They can't… help themselves, to spread gossip which is meant to be secretive. … It reminds me of a propaganda poster I saw once, from me father — he used to collect that sort of war memorabilia. You wanna know what it read? … Do ya?"

Verosika couldn't help but nod, forcing herself to do so in a hope that it would improve her chances of surviving this encounter.

The sinner cleared his throat, taking another swig of wine, before continuing; "It read; "Loose Lips Might Sink Ships". … A very true statement… I suppose it can also be applied in times of peace…

Such as now. I gotta tell ya something, seemin' that you wanna stick your nose in other people's business..."

The sickly individual before Verosika glared down towards Verosika with a cold, threatening look letting off a shuddering breath; "My name.. is Victor Malloy. That man you met today, and tried to seduce, was a young man.. named James Steele. I am after James Steele; I want him dead. But for whatever reason, that… filthy dog called "Loona" has decided to… protect him from me, which really pisses me off. What I'm trying to do is to get to him, and to go through everyone which makes THAT task more difficult."

Just as he finishes his sentence, Malloy proceeds to reach into the depths of his coat's inner pockets, his corpse-like fingers latching onto something, proceeding to pull it out and hold it within his twisted, unsettling hands.

Immediately after recognising what the object in question was, Verosika began to fear dearly for her life; it was a revolver, loaded, and ready to fire. Beads of nervous sweat pooled upon Verosika's forehead, her body shaking in fear as she began to feel increasingly light-headed. This was all so bizarre, so unreal! Was she really about to die? And over what??

With a shaky, fearful breath, Verosika began pleading loudly, practically shrieking; "Nonono! W-Wait, please!! W-What do you want from me?? We can.. w-we can talk this out, I promise!"

The sinner seemed to completely ignore the succubus' pleading, his sinister eyes gazing down at the gun resting in both hands; "You wanna know how many times I've had to shoot people into submission? I personally don't like doing it, but uh.. sometimes you've got no choice. What can ya do when people wanna squeal about things which they're not meant to know about?"

Tears of overwhelming fear for her life began to appear within Verosika's eyes as she was left speechless to what was about to happen to her, watching helplessly as Malloy's corpse-like right hand wrapped around the grip, his thumb then cocking back the hammer with a foreboding, echoey "click"!

Malloy continued with his dialogue, enjoying every moment of this little visit; "This little revolver here has always been my favorite. It's a Bodeo Model 1889 — An Italian Model. You know where Italy is up on Earth, Verosika? Ey? … Yeah nah, of course ya don't, my deary. … Now the reason why I love his little gun… is because of how light it is. It makes aiming that bit easier. It doesn't have that much recoil either, which makes it more than suitable on me rough old hands."

Verosika's nerve began to break, her beyond terrified eyes not once moving away from the weapon, the sight of which caused her to whimper pitifully. The clear mental trauma being inflicted upon the pop star before him caused Malloy to "smile" deviously. Although his lips appeared to have shriveled away with the considerable decay that had taken place on his disheveled husk that he called a body, his permanent sinister grin seemed to inexplicably grow wider, his rotted muscles retracting across his face like a serpent unveiling its poisonous fangs.

Streaks of mascara and tears began rolling down Verosika's vibrant pink cheeks as she croaked through the lump formed in her throat; "Pl-Please.. Please don't.. **hic** I-I'm sorry – I'm so fucking sorry–! **hic-hic** Just don't–"

A mocking look of artificial "pity" appeared on Malloy's face, stabbing his cold gaze towards the sobbing woman pleading for her life. This facade only lasted a short few seconds until it turned into a scolding glance; "Oh stop it with the fucken crying, woman! You'll be fine! Just a quick ***BANG*** and you'll fall asleep!"

To Verosika's overwhelming shock and horror, Malloy raised the revolver point black between her eyes, his own horrible eyes burning with pure sinister delight! The succubus gasped, at last now beginning to wail, pushing her hands in front of her face while letting out a pitiful last stand in her bargaining!

"WAIT! NO STOP PLEASE!! I-I DON'T WANNA–"

BANG!!!

"AAAAAAAAAAHH!!!!!"

…

Verosika's eyes shot back open, her vision cloudy from all of her horrific, desperate sobbing and tears. Her ears rang from the sudden thunderous noise, peeking out to reveal that she, in fact, hadn't been shot. Instead, at the very last second, Malloy had aimed her shot at the wall directly behind her, leaving a hole where the projectile hit. Poor Verosika's body was shaking violently from the terror that had been invoked upon her. Although the worst of it was over, the ordeal was not.

The succubus yelped as she felt a rough, putrid hand grab her by one of her horns, forcing her head forward to meet the vicious sinner's crouched eye-level, glaring directly at her with piercing eyes! Through her continuous sobbing, Malloy spoke for one final time.

"You fucken listen to me, you spoilt-rotten little bastard, and you listen ***GOOD***," he began in a guttural and frightening voice; "***YOU'RE*** going to delete all of those words on that mobile phone of yours. You are ***NOT*** going to breathe a word to anyone about young James Steele being down here. ***YOU*** are going to mention ***NOTHING*** about what happened tonight to anybody, not even to that big decrepit mutt called "Vortex", yeah? Because I will snap his rotten fucken neck if he finds out. Let tonight be a lesson for you to stay out of my. ***Fucking***. ***BUSINESS***. Because if you don't? I'll put one of these little brass bullets right between ***YOUR SLUTTY LITTLE EYES!!***"

The truly wretched sinner then forcefully pushed Verosika back into the backrest of the sofa, leaving the now fearful, traumatized succubus to shiver and cry; her cheeks streaked with expensive mascara and her nerves completely shattered. Without anything more than a second acknowledgement of Verosika's existence, Malloy strided his way back out of the bedroom which echoed the sobs of who was almost his next victim, proceeding to abruptly shut the door behind him.

For the next few enduring minutes, the traumatized and beyond petrified Verosika weeped, curled up into a pitiful ball and pressing herself against the soothing comfort of the couch, trying to regather her nerves which were in a complete and utter mess from the ordeal. It took her a few more sorrowful minutes to recuperate herself, letting out a few shuddering coughs, finally calming herself down just enough for her to function at the bare minimum. Through watery eyes, Verosika glanced around the room, proving to herself with complete certainty that the coast was clear; she was safe.That was when she looked down at her phone, resting upright with the screen turned on, the few short paragraphs of text staring her in the face.

It was then and there that Verosika decided to abide by the sinner's staunch and uncompromising advice – for her own good.

With two short glasses of Rum on "The Rocks" now circulating in her system, Loona departed from the bar which she had called "home" for the past hour. The potent scent of caramel-flavored liquor sat on her breath, the smell of which Loona personally assumed would linger for the next couple of hours or so. Oh well; good thing she wasn't planning on driving. In addition to the lingering hint of alcohol, the disguised hellhound couldn't help but feel relaxed to an almost numbing degree, the stresses of what had occurred over the past three days felt like a bad, distant

memory to her. Whether that was because Loona was tipsy from the two shots of rum she had consumed or because she was in a low-stress environment was up for debate.

For the past couple of minutes since leaving “The Lord Dunwich Hotel”, Loona had taken to going for a mindless stroll, roaming aimlessly on the grassy shoulder of the quiet backroads. Elegant foliage grew in scattered formations within the grass underneath the lonesome figure’s shoes as she walked, the scenic picture complete with elegant trees, their branches swaying delicately with the continuous brief winds which cut through the air, like a knife to hot butter. In a decision most unusual to Loona, she had decided to keep her phone zipped up in her backpack, instead resorting to examining her surroundings with peaceful indifference, her hands tucked into the lower pockets of her new maroon jacket.

After a few more peacefully lonesome minutes of wandering at her own pace, Loona spots something off in the near distance. It was the entrance to a yard of some description with a gravel pathway diverting off the road and leading into it; a vintage, rustic metallic gate guarding the entrance. As Loona made her way up to the gate, what exactly this moderately spacious courtyard was became apparent — It was a cemetery, complete with a small colonial-era Church made of stone, nestled under the towering, outreaching branches of a large oak tree.

This rather isolated location managed to pique Loona’s interest, the disguised hellhound deciding upon actively entering the location to see what she could find. Maybe she could find something remotely intriguing? It wouldn’t hurt to have a quick look.

The weather-beaten hinges of the cast-iron gate groaned noisily as Loona swung it open, squeezing herself through the gap to allow herself inside the newly discovered grounds. The morning dew had soaked into the gravel pathway beneath Loona’s feet, crunching softly as the disguised hellhound paced the grounds curiously. A feeling of complete and utter peace occupied Loona’s frame of mind as she became familiar with the new surroundings, thoroughly enjoying being amidst the sounds of silence and nature in all its tranquil splendor.

Loona continued to stroll casually, finally reaching the end of the gravel path and onto the finely kept grass, discovering an allotment of headstones of various ages and shapes, each intimating the location of a grave. In spite of the melancholic nature of the small cemetery, the vibrant colors of the luscious greenery and decorative, pristinely maintained foliage managed to provide a pleasant backdrop to the scene. It was obvious whoever the groundskeeper was took pride within his gardening skills especially with the vibrant flowers which had been planted.

In addition to the remarkable gardening, positioned off to Loona’s right, nestled in the midst of another large, towering tree was a quaint red bench. Slouching lazily upon the bench with his legs

crossed and a new hat dipped over his eyes was a man — a man which Loona immediately recognised.

"… What the fuck is— what is he wearing??"

For a second, Loona was taken aback, squinting her eyes in confusion while trying to decipher what exactly Jim was wearing upon his head. Loona had seen many types of headdresses, of different styles and makes; but none which looked so dated as the gray-colored one currently sitting loosely over Jim's eyes. Loona decided to have a closer inspection, walking over about twenty paces towards Jim, noticing that the human slumped before her didn't react to her obvious presence, indicating that he was most likely asleep.

Luckily, Loona had just the thing to wake him up a little.

With a smug half-smirk, she proceeds to lightly kick the human in his right leg, causing him to lurch out of his sleep.

"OW! Ow-Woah!– Huh??"

Jim instantly takes the hat off his head, making sense of his surroundings before noticing Loona standing off to his left.

"O-Oh hey! Hah, ya found me!"

Loona lightly shook her head while maintaining her half-smirk; "Yeah, no shit I have. What the hell are you wearing?"

The freshly awoken human blinks a couple of times, rubbing the sleep from his eyes while acting none the wiser; "What, the coat? … Oh, the hat!"

The disguised hellhound scoffs; "That thing's a hat??"

Jim smirks, gesturing to the dark-gray flat cap gripped in his right hand; “Yup! It’s a flat cap, keeps me head warm. Nice woolen one, too! Whatcha think of it?”

Loona eyes lock onto the odd headdress displayed within Jim’s hands, giving it an almost repulsed look; “Uh-huh. And you bought that… “thing” with the money I gave you?”

“Yup.”

“... It looks like a skinned opossum.”

The human cackled; “Oh come off it! It’s not that bad, is it?”

“Uh, yeah! It is!” Loona lectured; “I mean, look at it! You look like a jackass wearing it as well! That, or some… sour old man. Eugh.”

Jim replied with a suppressed chuckle, giving off a wide smirk of his own; “Oh, you fancy it really! That’s just your little way of appreciating fashion.”

Loona rolled her eyes; “Fashion my ass. Scoot over “old man”, I wanna sit down.”

Without any hesitation, the human shuffles himself to the left of the bench, providing Loona with adequate room. Jim’s gothic associate promptly rested herself on the space provided to her, letting out a soft huff as she relaxed, lazily perching her left arm over the backrest after setting her backpack down under her legs. For a moment, Loona considered pulling out a cigarette to further ease her nerves. However, in the strangest of thoughts, something in the back of her mind told her not to, thus causing her to reject the urge for nicotine.

The disguised hellhound cleared her throat, attempting to get rid of the scent of rum on her breath, before striking up conversation; “So what brought you out here?”

The young bushman cocked his head towards Loona’s general direction; “What, to the cemetery? Nothin’. It’s peaceful, sitting here with the breeze, this massive tree behind us, and the flowers… It’s all so pleasant.”

As Jim spoke, Loona gazed out into the foreground before her, appreciating the scene for what it was; "... Yeah… Yeah, I get where you're coming from. What's it with you and finding chill-as-fuck spots like this?"

Jim shrugs weakly, staring out towards the colonial-era church; "I dunno. Suppose I've always had a knack for it. Just one of those things. … You know what? I'll do you one question better."

The gothic visitor to the grounds glanced over to Jim, curious of what he had to say; "Go on, shoot. I'm hearing you."

For a short couple of seconds, the young man hesitates, thinking about what he had to say before continuing; "Don't snap at me for saying so, but hear me out… A-And I know it's pretty bleedin' obvious, but we're complete opposites in more ways than one. Yet… we get along. Why do you think that is?"

Loona froze at this observation, turning her head back towards the man sitting alongside her before delivering her thought-out reply; "Okay, first off; Why would you think I'd snap at you for pointing that out? I already knew, I'm not stupid."

Jim gestures his hand in dismissal; "Just making sure."

"Hm. Fair." The disguised hellhound replies before continuing; "I mean… To be fair, we haven't always gotten along. I've gotten pissed off with you before, I'm sure you know that. … But there's a saying I heard once a long time ago. I can't remember exactly where I've heard it before, but it goes something like "Opposites Attract"."

Upon reciting this little saying she had heard once before, Loona gave off a smirk; "I don't know about you, but me, personally? I think that sums up this weird friendship we have."

The thoughtful human returned the smirk with one of his own; "Hm. I suppose you've got a point there."

But Loona wasn't done with her evaluation just yet; "Of course I do. And, like… you're actually nice to me; hospitable even. Guess I'm just returning the favor. And no, you may not understand everything about me down to a tee, but you try to understand nonetheless. … And that's more important to me than you know."

Jim solemnly nods his head, giving off a faint smile; "Glad to hear that. … You wanna know something?"

"What."

"It's been an interesting journey with you. As in, becoming mates like this. Those first few days when we first met, you were ready to slit my throat. But now? Here we are, on a bench, getting along. … I find that hilarious."

Loona scoffs; "Pfuh! That's to say the least. … Hang on, is… someone in there?"

The adjacent human sniffs a little, trying to follow Loona's line of sight, discovering that she was looking towards the open passageway; "In the church? Yeah, just the groundskeeper I suppose. She was here before I arrived."

"Cool," Loona asked with just a minuscule hint of genuine interest.

Jim nodded in a confirmatory manner; "Aye. She offered me a flask of tea when I arrived, because of how cold it is out here. I declined, but, well… she's insistent in bringing out that bloody tea. Bit of country hospitality, hey? She also said something about her father being the deacon out here."

Almost right on cue, the groundskeeper exited through the doorway and right onto the grounds of the cemetery, carrying a small board, a tall tin flask of tea and a pair of tin camping mugs resting on its surface. The girl carrying it was casually dressed; a long-sleeved white sweater and a long skirt which stretched all the way down to a pair of black laced winter boots she wore. Her dyed-red hair was tied-up into a bun to accommodate for the blue beanie nestled upon her head.

The young man shook his head with a grin, calling out to the groundskeeper; "You're persistent with that generosity of yours, arentcha?"

“And as I said to you! I’m not having anyone catching pneumonia on my grounds!” The groundskeeper lectured in a good-natured way as she approached the two visitors, setting the board atop a decorative garden table positioned to the rightmost side of the bench. It didn’t take the groundskeeper long to finally notice Loona’s presence; “And this is your friend, hey?”

“Yup! This is her.” Jim confirmed, gesturing weakly towards Loona who looked on intently.

The groundskeeper nodded, proceeding to pick up both camping mugs, filling them both up and promptly handing them out to the two visitors.

Despite the generosity, Loona attempted to decline the offer, raising her hands; “Nah, don’t worry about me. I had some rum before I got here.”

This news didn’t phase the groundskeeper at all, who persisted; “What? That cold stuff on a cold morning?? Surely you’d want something warmer. Come on, have some! It’s gentle on the stomach!”

Loona persisted with her protest, perhaps with futility; “Nonono, I swear! I’m perfectly fine–”

“Just take the tea, Loona,” Jim whispered with a smirk, knowing that his companion was fighting a losing battle.

As had been mentioned to Jim countless times from Loona, she wasn’t one to take generosity. Although this was the case, she began to realize that perhaps she had no other choice than to accept the damn offer. With a grunt, Loona begrudgingly takes the simmering tin mug of tea out of the groundskeeper’s hands before examining it. The concoction before her had a rich reddish-brown coloring to it; the gentle, faint flow of steam wisping up towards her nose. The smell of herbs tickled her nose which managed to catch Loona’s curiosity.

With mild hesitation, she takes a sip… it tasted surprisingly sweet with an almost floral aftertaste.

“Woah. This.. isn’t half bad,” Loona remarked quietly to herself, though just loud enough for the server to hear.

“Thanks! I made it myself.” the groundskeeper remarked, obviously taking pride in her ability; “If you two need anything or have any questions, I’ll be inside.”

Loona gave a thumbs up as she gently sipped another slither of tea, perhaps enjoying it more than the Rum she drank the hour prior. There was something so refreshingly natural about the tea which gave her a sense of warm comfort.

The gothic tea-drinker snickered coldly to herself, shaking her head as an almost self-depreciating thought entered her mind.

“What’s so funny?” Jim had heard the quiet snickering for himself, taking a sip of his own serving of warm tea.

Loona shook her head, a disbelieving grin appearing on her face; “I can’t fucking believe I’m doing this. … Really, I can’t! Here I am, without my phone, sitting next to some country yokel dressed as someone’s grandpa, sitting in a churchyard while drinking herbal tea. Shit, I should buy myself a flowery dress and call myself a damn prairie girl!”

Jim nearly spat his own tea upon hearing this, letting out a wheezing cough; “S-SHIT! HAH! Oh bugger! N-Now that’s a thought! The Little Gothic on The Prairie!”

Loona’s face screwed up upon hearing this title; “That’s disgusting! No! I don’t wanna hear that EVER again! Eugh, fuck…”

“Oh come on, that’s funny!”

“No it’s not, it’s humiliating!”

“Pffft. Whatever you say, prairie girl.”

“Jim.”

“Yeah?”

“Shut. Up.”

“Heheh— Righto~.”

After this jovial stint of lively wisecracking, they both fell into a peaceful silence once more, taking a moment together to appreciate this part of the world in all its nature with the company of free herbal tea. For Loona, this place was a rare moment of true peace and quiet; a chance to take it slow, away from the continuous on-and-off dramatics which she usually had to put up with. In contrast to Loona’s point of view, for Jim, this place was his home — his dear homeland; a place which he yearned to stay within for as long as time permitted.

Breaking the silence once more in a soft voice was Jim; “I got a few DVDs with this hat.”

While taking another gentle swig of her drink, Loona’s eyes shifted back towards Jim, raising her eyebrow; “Mm?”

The young bushman went on to elaborate; “It was a sale at one of them antique stores—”

“Explains the hat,” Loona interrupted with a wide smirk.

“Yeah yeah, real funny mad dog,” Jim rolled his eyes before continuing; “Anyhow! The four-one-one was this; If I bought something over forty bucks they’d add in four DVDs for free. Some kind of end-of-trade clearance thing, and they wanted to get rid of some shit they couldn’t sell.”

Loona was pessimistic about this “deal”, assuming that her associate had fallen for some bullshit run-of-the-mill scam. She was familiar with those types of scams back in pride, tucked away in some dingy little street corner with some lowlife imp looking to make a quick buck through the sale of terrible sub-par pornography.

“Congrats Jim, you’ve fallen for a scam,” Loona remarked in an almost pitying way, perhaps rushing to judgment too hastily; “You got some old man’s hat and a bunch of shitty movies. Uff.. What a way to blow your money.”

Jim couldn’t help but snort back in return; “You haven't even seen them yet! How can you be so sure they’re crap? Who knows, maybe you’ll see one you like?”

“… Eh, maybe I will,” Loona capitulates, having a slight change of heart; “Go on, show us the goods.”

The bearer of the “goods” acts upon the direction by reaching into the inner pockets of his coat, fumbling around before finally revealing the second-hand DVD casings he had acquired. Now the artifacts displayed before Loona weren’t anything too spectacular; just a small stack of casings which displayed obvious signs of their age. The first case in this small collection was a war film from who-knows how long ago.

Loona examined it with stark indifference, letting out a hint of lightly disparaging sarcasm; “Wow, riveting. “Bridge on The River Kwai”. You sure are debunking the “22-year-old grandpa” allegations with this one.”

“And you’re the one drinking herbal tea, smartarse,” Jim coldly remarked with a partial grin, shuffling through the stack to reveal the next film; “How about this one? Up to your high standards?”

Now things were getting good, to Loona’s genuine surprise.

The disguised hellhound’s eyes widened, finding mild enthusiasm; “Oh shit, Kill Bill?? Huh… never watched it.”

“But you’ve heard of it?”

“I think I’ve seen a clip or two somewhere,” Loona shrugged, a partial grin beginning to form on her face; “Looks tacky-as-fuck and is obnoxiously gorey. It’s exactly my kind of movie.”

“I figured you’d fancy this one,” Jim admits, slowly nodding his head as he examined the last two DVD casings; another war film and some sappy romance movie; “Might as well binge this crap later today, huh? Seeming that we’ve got bugger-all else to do.”

Loona raised her brow to this suggestion; “What? Rot our brains with some crappy movies that you got for free? … Sounds like a plan. We’re gonna need to get ourselves some grub if we’re gonna do that. I don’t want the experience to be too shitty, if you know what I mean.”

“Too right, mate; too right,” the young bushman agrees; “The question is which film do we begin with? River Kwai or Tarantino’s stuff?”

Loona scoffs; “As if I’m torturing myself by watching a damn war movie, Jim. You really are out of your mind–”

The adamant hellhound is cut off when Jim puts his finger up for a counterpoint; “Ah–! But what if you end up liking it? What if it’s good?? You didn’t have a problem with that mercenary documentary you saw back at home.”

“... Dammit, you got me there,” Loona at last capitulates; “Fine! We’ll watch that one first... But I’m subjecting you to Kill Bill and that romance film right after.”

“Deal… wait, you’re into romance?”

Loona’s eyes widened in a hint of shock, realizing what she had just let slip. Perhaps she had gotten herself too comfortable with mentioning certain guilty pleasures.

“Wh— N-No..? Romance?? As if I’d be into that sappy bullshit! Y-You’re speaking out your ass!” The disguised hellhound sweated with a nervous toothy smile while trying to cover her tracks, a sudden wave of embarrassment overcoming her.

A wide, knowing grin spread across Jim’s face, practically taunting Loona. The human didn’t need to say anything, knowing that the usually pessimistic and surly woman to his left had just outed herself.

Upon noticing Jim's shit-eating grin, Loona became defensive; "Oh fuck off! As if the trash you watch is any better!"

"You said it, not me~."

"... You're an asshole, Jim."

"Yeah nah, I know~."

"Morning everyone. How are we?"

…

"Good, good. … Chilly out, hey? … Yeah nah, it's a nice coat."

…

"Are we going live? … Ten seconds? No worries."

…

"We good? Righto. … Good morning everyone, thank you all for coming to the press conference this morning. I'm Senior Constable Trevor Pearson of the Morrisvale Police, I'm here with Senior Constable Clyde Barnes of the Gilgowie Police to my left, and to my right here is Private Investigator Mr. Vasily Georgyvich Antonov.

This morning, we entered into a meeting with Police Commissioner Katrina Carroll with regards to funding resources for a developing missing persons situation. Unfortunately as of yet, we cannot

release any.. specific details as to who this missing individual is just yet, but we shall release public information at Three P.M. today.

I am permitted, however, to release some preliminary information. The missing person is an individual in his early twenties, a local to the township of Morrisvale in the Darling Downs Regional Area. He was reported missing roughly three days ago to date, and was last seen the day prior. The circumstances of his disappearance are currently unknown to us, yet we are treating this as a highly suspicious situation.

I am aware that there have been rumors circulating about this particular case over the course of this developing situation in the general public. I'd like to address that these rumors are not helpful and only complicates the job we have to do.

Any questions?"

…

"Are there any suspects identified as of yet who could be connected to this disappearance?"

"We haven't been able to identify any culprits at this time. There have been some artifacts we have found at the scene which we have handed over to a forensics lab for DNA testing. At some stage within the next twenty-four hours, we will have preliminary information with regards to suspects which will be released."

…

"There have been other disappearances in the past twenty years linked to local organized crime in the local catchment area. Are there any signs that this may be connected to those historic cases?"

"None whatsoever. Again, the information which we have thus far is very preliminary, but there is no information to suggest that this particular instance is linked to any organized criminal activity."

…

“Uhh… You there, at the back.”

“Is there any indication to suggest whether or not this missing person is deceased?”

“We can’t say for complete certainty, but Mr. Antonov has determined from the evidence and information provided to him that there is a high probability that the missing person is still alive.”

…

“Yes you. At the front.”

“Morning, I'm Stephen Sullivan with the Morrisvale Town Crier. I just wanted to touch on a rumor that has been going about. It relates to tall, shadowy figures which have been spotted around the Morrisvale and Kilgowie regions over the past thirty or so years. Is there anything to suggest that __”

“I’m sorry, no. I’m not answering that. As I said, rumors only make the job harder for us. We ask the public not to make any assumptions or resort to speculation, and only to understand the facts which we will release to the public in due course.”

…

“Are we done? Okay. Good morning, everyone.”

Madness! Madness!

Glug… Glug… Glug…

Gasp!

"Sh-Shtupid fucking human… ****Hic!**** Rrragh… Coming here an'… th-throwing his shit-smeared — ****Hic!**** nnngh… w-weight around…"

The scent of alcohol lingered in the air like a foul fragrance polluting the atmosphere. Blitz was alone and completely intoxicated within the relative safety of his apartment, having since spent the past few hours wallowing in a mixture of convoluted thoughts, consisting of everything from self-doubt, to frustration, and everything in-between. After a certain point, as the mid-to-late afternoon turned into evening, Blitz had decided that these thoughts of "guilt" were too much for him to bear alone, turning towards a few bottles of booze to keep him in good company – By a "few", at least by Blitz's drunken definition, was four bottles and counting.

While under the spell of his blurry and partially impaired eyesight, the inebriated imp glared at the bottle of alcohol held firmly in his grip, trying his hardest to decipher the letters written on the label to no avail. Blitz fumbled his pitiful attempts at reading the bottle, only managing to produce a series of grumbles and slurred noises which could be compared to the sound of a heavily intoxicated cougar. These failed attempts at speaking only served to deteriorate Blitz's mood even further…

"T-The fuck even is this schiz..? Fhuh—… F-Feehl… N-No, it'sh—… Schush-zhl-fuhhhaaaaa—aaaaAAAAAAAHHHH!!!"

In a wild fit of drunken rage, Blitz sends the bottle careening through the air, towards the front door!

CRASH!!

"GET THE FUHK OUTTA HEEEEERRREEEE!!!"

After practically screaming his lungs out, Blitz clumsily throws himself over the back of the couch and onto his feet, but not before nearly landing face-first onto the floor! Remarkably, it didn't take long for the beyond-drunken imp to find his footing, allowing for him to haul himself towards the door, his right hand grappling towards the door in a disgustingly uncoordinated fashion. A nearly momentous effort was made to grab hold of the door handle which eventually ended in success. Just as Blitz swings the door open in a lumbering way, he cocks his throbbing head back towards Loona's door, deciding to call out.

"H-He— NNF!!— Hey Looooo-niieeee~!! Oh pumpkin-pieeee~!! D-Daddy is jusht going for a night walk, o-okayyyyy~? C-Cahll me if chu neeeeeed anything~!!"

…

"Oh… O-Ohhhhh! Thatsh riiiiight! You're not here, are chu Loonie?? Nooo… Yee-You're— *hic!* …in the living world… with that piece of HUMAN SHIET!! IS THAT WHAT YOU DO NOW LOONIE?? ABANDON YOUR OLD MAN AFTER EVERYTHING I'VE DONE FOR YOU?!?"

…

"I-I'm shorry schweetie, I… I'm a fucking mess… I-I'm a complete and uhtter joke… aren't I…? A-Am I a dischappoint-muhnt, Loonie…? D-Do I do enough…? … A-Am I enough…??"

…

"… F-Fuhck you, Loonie… Fu— ***hic!*** fuhck you…"

And with that final scolding word over and done with, Blitz drunkenly waltzed his way out of the apartment with keys in hand, slamming the door behind him which allowed it to lock.

It would take a beyond remarkable miracle for Blitz to stumble his way down the hallway towards the elevator, then to call the elevator for the ground floor, proceed to ride the elevator down to aforementioned ground level, and wander out into the streets of imp city for whatever drunken hike he wanted to take. Yet, despite the overwhelming odds against him in his state of severe alcoholism, Blitz managed to perform just that.

Soon, Blitz was wandering through the dark and gloomy streets of the city, lumbering his way along while mumbling incoherently to himself; so incoherently that even to himself it sounded like the pitiful ramblings of a madman. Luckily for him, the evening had already passed on into the later hours, the street ambience within his immediate area reduced to a whisper as seldom any other imps, hellhounds, or anyone in-between were out and about, having long since returned home for sleep.

Disturbing the peace under the illuminated streetlamps was Blitz, rambling incessantly to himself.

"Ehhhh-hehehehe—***Hic!***—wheheh… W-Who knew that muh little Loonie luv'd travelling… to Aushtralya…?"

"No sorry, noht travelling… r-running away… with dirtbag hillbilly cockshuckers. … I wonder… I-I wonder if she likes their horseshit folk songs, too. H-how ***hic!***— How does it go again??"

…

"O-Oh Yeah, thatsh right! HERE WE GO, LOONIE! T-This ones for chu!!"

"Ohhhh~ Waltzhin' Muhtilduh, WALTZHIN' MUHTILDAAAAA~!!!"

"HEY, BUDDY! SHUT THE FUCK UP DOWN THE—"

BANG!! — BANG!!

Blitz abruptly pulled out his pistol from out of his pocket and fired two haphazardly-aimed warning shots into the air! This did the trick of scaring the stranger out of his wits, the intruder into Blitz's alcohol-fuelled ranting retreating back inside to avoid further confrontation.

"Why don't chu mind your own ***hic!*** f-fucking bizz', COCK KICKER?!?" Blitz drunkenly wailed, his voice hoarse and full of pure rage!

…

“Y-yeah! … T-That’sh what I thought! … A-Asshole!!”

Blitz’s evening stroll continued. The imp continued to walk aimlessly down the quiet streets, the darkness of the night consuming him, devouring him in much the same way he sunk the beer he consumed. By this point, his mind had completely shut off, the imps thoughts in so much of an incoherent mess that it made his head throb just by listening to them. On more than one occasion, Blitz felt bile rise up in his throat, bringing forth the overwhelming urge to vomit; an obvious sign of his deep intoxication.

Yet Blitz continued onwards…

At one point, Blitz thought he heard Loona call out from behind him, calling out for him to come home… yet he knew this was just his mind playing tricks on him, providing this sad, pitiful drunkard with wishful thoughts of him being… wanted. Small pricks of tears welled up in the Blitz’s eyes as the colossal feeling of despair overcame him, causing his breath to shudder in a most sorrowful way.

At this point in his current pitiful state, Blitz was no longer sure as to what he wanted. Peace? His Daughter? Comfort? Another bottle of booze? … He was no longer sure. Out of all of these convoluted thoughts, only thing was for certain; Blitz felt disappointed — Not in anyone else around him, but himself.

Sure enough, the drunken imp found himself entering into a dingy alleyway to his left, stumbling into it in order to give himself a rest. By this point, a momentous feeling of exhaustion started to overcome the lonesome Blitz, feeling his eyes begin to flutter as he struggled to stay awake. A part of him wished that he had stayed within the familiar comfort of his apartment, curled up on the couch as he had done so countless times before. … But what he wanted didn’t matter anymore, at least at this point in time, in this frame of mind; a dank and disgusting alleyway was what he felt he deserved.

Blitz slid himself down the side of the wall, slumping to the floor with his legs lazily sprawled out over the moisture-ridden pavement. With his head throbbing and a desire for sleep began to emerge victorious, the solitary and somber imp let out a drawn-out exhale, the scent of alcohol staining his breath, causing his nose to twitch in an almost disgusted reaction. It was as if Blitz’s own body was

scolding him – finding disgust in his actions and his demeanor; in the way he conducted himself and the decisions he made.

Even his own body hated him.

With this tear-jerking thought in mind, Blitz closed his eyes, at last giving himself some time to sleep.

…

“Mmmmhh…”

When Blitz opened his eyes once more while vocalizing a tired groan, he was met with an unexpected sight.

Instead of the gloomy surface of the brick wall directly in front of him, he was met with the shelves of an expensive bar. This aroused a sense of confusion within the imp, prompting him to become alert in an instant, his eyes shooting wide-open to intently analyze his surroundings. The first thing he noticed almost immediately was the way the shelves glowed with a pearly-white hue; as if they were producing a light of their own, though it didn’t strain Blitz’s eyes as he glared intently at them. The next thing he noticed was the bar top he sat before, his arms crossed atop its scarlet surface made of the finest marble known to imp-kind. It felt silky to the touch, as if whoever polished it had the word “perfection” in mind, manifesting the aforementioned noun into a mesmerizing physical form.

That was when Blitz finally noticed his surroundings, causing him to freeze when he realized what he sat amidst; Nothing. Absolutely Nothing; a dark, foreboding blackness. It wasn’t as if Blitz’s immediate surroundings were consumed by darkness, just out of reach of the shelves’ lighting. Instead, it was as if Blitz’s surroundings were nothing but a dark, empty void of vast, neverending nothingness; as if the bar he sat before existed in a dimension of its own. Blitz began to feel a creeping loneliness which only ceased when he turned around, surprised to see a familiar face standing behind the bar.

It was Millie. What Blitz found rather peculiar was what she was wearing; a cherry-red tuxedo with a pink collar, a white dress shirt worn underneath, all complete with a black bowtie pinned neatly against the shirt’s pristinely-kept collar.

“O-Oh, Millie! W-What are you doing here?” Blitz finally asked, his speech clear and concise.

Millie gave off a calm smile; “Just workin’.”

Blitz raised his eyebrow, drumming his fingers lightly against the bar top; “What, at a bar? Suppose it’s a long night, huh?”

“Longer than you think.”

…

“Where’s, uh… W-Where’s Moxxie?”

“Back at home,” Millie answered, her voice methodical and deliberate in its soothing tone; “Care for a drink?”

Blitz shook his hand in a dismissive gesture; “N-no, I’m good Mills! I-I think I’ve had enough for one night, yanno?”

This response prompted a weak smile to emerge on Millie’s face; “So now you recognise it? Better late than never.”

“Too right, Mills… Too right…”

An eerie silence took over for a while as the two imps stared at each other with glassy-eyed stares. What in reality was a few seconds felt more like an oppressive eternity, the faint sound of low white noise filling the air, giving credence to Blitz’s assumption that they were in an endless void.

In a self-depreciative manner, Blitz buried his head in his hands while cringing; “Agh, dammit… I’m such a fucking mess. I-I really am…”

“You really don’t have to be, sir.”

“But I am!” Blitz snapped back, though Millie didn’t flinch, as if her boss’ outburst didn’t register; “I really am! Look at me… I-I’m a drunken pile of living dogshit. My daughter doesn’t like me. I fuck up everything I’m involved with. I can’t look after myself… And now? I’m blacked out in a piece-of-shit alleyway, dreaming that I’m sitting in a bar in the middle of a bottomless black abyss, talking to you! I mean, you don’t even work in a bar! None of this makes sense… None of what I’m saying makes sense. I just– I don’t know anymore… What do I do…”

…

“… Have you tried toning down how selfish you are?”

Blitz froze for a second, removing his head from the palm of his hands to turn his attention back towards Millie; “Wh… What did you say to me?”

“Stop being so selfish,” Millie repeated, her voice almost deliberately monotone and abnormally calm; “You’re making this all about you — again. Loona’s right, Blitz; you’re making out as if this is all about you. What about how Loona feels? What about the human? You’ve been complicating this entire situation for not only your own daughter, but for yourself as well because you refuse to cooperate.”

Blitz was left completely speechless, unable to believe what he was hearing; “B… B-But I have… I have been cooperating! I-If I wasn’t being cooperative, that Jim-Boy would be stone fucking dead! If this was my choice, I would’ve killed that human shitbag as soon as I laid my eyes on him! H-He’s a liability to me!— I-I mean! To… to us!”

With a serious, almost mocking look on her face, Millie shook her head; “There we go again. That same-old selfish attitude — the root of the problem.”

A hint of anger began to rise up within Blitz’s eyes, a faint sneer appearing on his lips; “… Fuck you, Millie.”

The female imp shook her head solemnly; “You can argue all you like, Blitz, but you’re not doing yourself any favors; you’re just making things worse. What happens if your selfishness continues and it ends up hurting your daughter? What then? Who will you blame for that? You can only blame others for so long, until you start needing to accept humility.”

Blitz huffed in frustration; “But how, Millie? H-How do I “accept humility”? W-What does that even mean; to lower my guard?? Fuck sakes— It's a dog-eat-dog world out there! We all have to fight to survive for our own sakes! I don’t have time to watch out for others, to watch out for defenseless weaklings who can’t fend for themselves! The only reason why I’ve survived for so long is because I’ve got no empathy! That kinda sappy horseshit is for pussies!”

“Then why did you adopt Loona?”

“… E-Excuse me??”

The male imp could hardly believe what his female counterpart had just asked, leaving him practically speechless.

“When you found Loona, sitting in the corner of her cell in the hellhound adoption center, what made you adopt her?”

“I… I… Millie, Loona’s totally different! She’s my daughter for shit sakes! How is she comparable to some mangy, good-for-nothing human??”

A look of deep-rooted seriousness grew on Millie’s face, her eyes firmly locked onto Blitz’s own; “But wasn’t she defenseless when you found her? Wasn’t she scared? Alone? Wasn’t she a “weakling” in her time of need? Didn’t you answer her plea for help? For mercy?”

“…Millie, why are—”

“Answer the question, Blitz.”

…

“Yes. Yes she was. And yes, I did. I-I got her out of that shithole.” Blitz quietly replied, his gaze averting away from Millie’s for a moment in pensive thought; “I gave her the home she desperately needed. I saw her and I saw myself gazing right back at me. I didn’t want her to live alone and afraid; like how I’ve lived for a very long time.”

Millie gave off a small smile, signaling that this was perhaps the right answer; “And what do you call that? Acting to help someone out of their misfortune and misery?”

Blitz shrugged, thinking of the answer; “… Mercy.”

“That’s right,” the female imp smiles; “See, Blitz? You’re not as cold-hearted as you think you are. If you were, you wouldn’t have adopted Loona in the first place. She would’ve succumbed to whatever fate would’ve been put upon her if she stayed there for any longer. And what if she was set out into the world as soon as she turned eighteen? What would’ve happened then?”

Tears began to well up in Blitz’s eyes and his bottom lip quivered, prompting the male imp to wipe his face; “She… s-she would’ve—… It wouldn’t be good, Millie. … Something would’ve happened to my beautiful girl… ***snff*** oh, my sweet, sweet

“See? You understand. You understand the cruelty of the world,” Millie calmly states, continuing to pay her full attention towards her male counterpart; “What Loona is doing now is replicating the same mercy and empathy you gave to her, to someone else; a friend. No, you may not like it, and you may see it as inconvenient; but who are you to stand in the way of letting her help someone she finds needs her support? Do you want to stand in her way?”

Blitz meekly shook his head, wiping the emotional tears from his bloodshot eyes, his lip still scrunched at the thought of something happening to his one and only daughter.

With a soft smile, Millie continued; “Then let her do what she feels needs doing, Blitz. Let her do what she feels is right. Let her shine.”

“… ***snff*** O-Okay… Okay… I get what you’re saying,” Blitz nodded, his eyes stained with tears which fogged up his vision.

“That’s a good imp, Blitz. That’s a good imp.”

“B-But Millie..? What if… ***snff*** w-what if I don’t get better? What if I don’t become a better person? A better… a-a better father…?”

“But you will, sir. You will,” Millie reassures; “In the fullness of time...”

“In the fullness of time.”

“Officer, Sir! British Officer! Here to blow up the bridge!”

“Blow up the bridge??”

“Y-Yes, sir— Yes, sir! British Commando orders, sir!”

“Blow up the bridge?!?”

A scene of heightened tension played out on the flat-screen TV as the movie began to approach its resolution. For the past three hours since returning to their motel room later in the day, both the hellhound — back in her hellhound form — and her human companion spent the early to mid afternoon binging the select few movies they had at their disposal.

The first movie to be watched, as was chosen in the grounds of the tranquil churchyard, was “Bridge on The River Kwai”; a war film which Jim was more than willing to watch, while Loona in direct contrast was slightly reluctant. The hellhound had taken a more pessimistic approach in assuming that it’d be like most old films; tacky, ridiculous acting, and effects which would make any reasonably thinking individual cringe. Watching the film, however, Loona couldn’t help but feel that her rather low expectations had been somewhat surpassed, somehow finding mild fascination in the story being told.

This, however, didn't prevent her from asking questions.

"Wait, so; who am I supposed to be rooting for again?" Loona inquired for the millionth time, watching on from the comfort of her bed, sitting upright with her legs crossed.

"It's not that type of film, mate," Jim explains as he sat on the foot of his respective bed; "It's supposed to show the horrors of war on both sides. Always loved it for that."

"You've watched this before?" The hellhound went on to ask.

"Yep. Multiple times," Jim confirmed; "Gotta be one of my favorites."

Loona's eyes narrowed slightly to watch the film progress with a critical eye, the sound of a high-pitched train whistle sounding off as it got ever closer, accompanied by the sound of gunfire being exchanged between combatants. The hellhound watched as a stray bullet hit one of the actors in the abdomen after it had ricocheted off the sand, causing him to go limp.

A light titter left Loona's maw as she smirked, deciding to mutter to herself in a lightly smug manner while shaking her head inconspicuously; "Pfft. That bullet wouldn't bounce like that. That's sand, not fucking metal."

Soon after came the mortar fire from high above atop a cliff, a soldier firing an individual round off into the enemy, causing a tremendous explosion as soon as it made contact with the ground, hitting numerous targets who were running through the shallow water.

The lead actor — that played by a man who Loona was told was someone with the last name of "Guinness" — took off his worn peaked cap, a look of shock and horror painted on his face with a glassy-eyed stare lasting a thousand miles. All the events and consequences leading up to this moment had dawned upon the character, leading him to utter what would be his final words.

"What have I done…?"

Loona muttered to herself once more, a disbelieving smirk spread across her muzzle while she scoffed.

“So now he realizes it… Congrats dumbass, you’re the slowest person to ever exist.”

Just as the lead actor begins running towards the detonator buried in the sand, another mortar shell explodes right behind him, sending him plummeting into the sand! This doesn’t deter him as the character — now fatally wounded — staggers back up onto his feet, using the remaining life he had left on him to approach the detonator; an effort to correct his wrongs. In spite of his efforts, he ends up succumbing to his newly-acquired shrapnel wounds, collapsing to the ground, directly on top of the wired detonator’s handle, sending the plunger downwards.

BOOM!!!

A series of thunderous explosions ignite the railway bridge, sending debris flying and causing the colossal structure to cave in on itself! The train, which had now arrived and was one-third across the bridge, careened into the shallow rock-ridden waters below, providing a dramatic scene in all of its horrific awe.

Another character, who was part of the Commando Team, gazed at the awful scene with a look of horror painted on his face, his expression sorely pained while delivering his simple, yet deeply cutting line.

“Madness! ... Madness!”

Loona faintly raised her brow in minor astonishment at the scene that had just unfolded; “Woah. Shit…”

“That does that then, hey..?” Jim added quietly, sighing in a mildly somber manner.

The last scene displayed on-screen was that of a still shot of the river; a lone sign amidst the floating timber debris detailing who had built the movie’s namesake, a solemn reminder of the horrors of human conflict. There was an uncomfortable silence as the grim scene dragged onwards for a few extra seconds as a form of tribute to the casualties.

At long last, the scene came to its silent conclusion, at last fading to black which finally marked the end of the entire film.

There was a stark and momentary silence which filled the motel room after the film had played, the pair of viewers being left to decide their own convictions about the movie they had just finished watching. It was Jim who decided to break the almost oppressive silence, clearing his throat as he turned around to face Loona.

“Whatcha think of that?”

Loona blinked a few times, taking a moment to decide her response, giving off an indecisive shrug before speaking; “I-I mean, it’s a movie. A little tacky with the sound design and some of the acting. Can’t say it wasn’t cool to watch though.”

“But did you like it?” Jim inquired further.

“Ehhh… I wouldn’t watch it again,” Loona concedes, delivering her honest answer while eating a singular piece of popcorn; “Not to say I didn’t like it, it’s just not my thing.”

The young bushman snickered a little, somewhat understanding Loona’s verdict; “Fair enough. I know what you like; you like those mindlessly violent type movies, the ones where people kill each other in cartoonishly-violent ways.”

A wide, toothy grin appeared on Loona’s muzzle as she clicked her fingers, pointing towards her roommate; “Abso-fucking-lutely. You know what that calls for?”

“Uhh, fucken… Kill Bi—”

“Yep! We’re watching Kill Bill,” Loona grins even wider; “And you’re going to watch every last second of it! It’s your punishment for making me watch some.. goddamn war movie about dumbasses shooting each other.”

Jim scoffs jokingly; “Oh come off it, it wasn’t terrible! You just admitted you liked watching it.”

“And I wouldn’t watch it again,” Loona remarked right back with a smirk, lifting herself off the bed with her choice of movie resting in one hand, the DVD encased inside; “Are we gonna watch this thing or not? Or do we wanna keep bitching like a pair of old people?”

“Fuck if I know. It’s up to you if you wanna watch it! No guarantees I’ll enjoy it though. I’m just an “old man” after all, at least according to you~,” Jim lightly teased, watching as the hellhound replaced the disk in the DVD player.

“Yeah, yeah, whatever you say… smartass…” Loona muttered to herself as she pressed the “play” button on the remote, allowing for her choice of movie to begin, marking the next phase of this binge watching session.

“I don’t even really know what this ruddy film’s about. You got a synopsis, Loona?”

“Something about a shitty marriage gone wrong? I don’t know, that’s what I’ve heard,” Loona answers; “Makes me reconsider if I want a relationship, to be frank.”

“You’re not in a relationship?” Jim seemed almost surprised by this sudden revelation.

Loona shook her head as she watched the screen, practically indifferent on the matter; “Nope. I’ve had crushes before, yeah, but nothing too far beyond that.”

Jim faintly raised his brow; “Huh… I assumed you and that “Vortex” lad were in one.”

Now this confession from the human caused Loona to pause, her eyes shifting in deep thought. Finally, she let out a sigh before speaking; “I wish, dude… I wish.”

“Ah yeah?”

The pensive hellhound nods her head; “Yeah… I’ll be honest with you; for the longest time, I had a fucking huge crush on Vortex. To a certain point? I think I still do. He invites me to these parties he organizes, and he’s always made me feel welcome whenever I’m around — even when I come uninvited which is, well, more often than not. I don’t know whether it was because of his looks or because he’s always tried to include me? But regardless, I developed feelings for him. Sadly, those feelings have… never been returned. Sucks to be me, I guess.”

Loona pivoted around on the bed as she sat down, turning around just enough to face Jim, her legs crossed comfortably atop the mattress. She clears her throat before continuing.

“At this point, I’ve just forced myself to accept that life’s pretty shit when it comes to certain things. I’ve had to face reality. That whole “Me and Vortex” pipe dream? That ship has sailed, if that ship even existed in the first place. Sometimes, you just gotta move on; find something or someone else who you have better prospects with. Me? I’ve yet to find that someone. … Though there is this one guy I met at a Hellhound Party… Damn, he’s cute~…”

Jim began to smile; “Yeah? Wanna tell me about him?”

“Mmm… Nah, fuck it. Maybe another time. Forget I said anything. We’re here to watch stupid movies; not gossip.” Loona snickered, pivoting back around on her respective bed to face the TV, the movie beginning to play the opening scene.

Jim obliged by the diversion away from the conversation, pivoting his head back around to face the TV screen. As the opening scenes to this considerably brutal movie played, Loona spoke up again.

“What about you?”

“Me?”

“Well, duh. You got a crush?”

An engaging question to be sure, and one which wasn’t lost on Jim who promptly answered; “Suppose I do. Little lady I know back in town; ‘Lorraine’, her name is. We started seeing each other a couple times, maybe once or twice? It’s been a while since I last saw her. Sometimes I wonder if that love’s still alive.”

“Oof. I know the feeling.” Loona acknowledges, eating another two pieces of microwave popcorn.

Jim gave a simple nod of his head; “Aye. Should probably take a page out of your book and — as you said — move on.”

The hellhound attention by this point was fast waning, her potently scarlet eyes fixated on the TV screen as her chosen movie dragged onwards; “Maybe you should? I dunno, it’s entirely up to you.”

A knowing grin spread across Jim’s face; “You’re zoning out, aren’t ya?”

“…Hm?”

“I’ll take that as a ‘yes’.”

As they had done so for the last film they had consumed, the pair of roommates sat in silence, their full attention paid towards the mindless entertainment being projected through the screen. Seconds turned to minutes as the film progressed slowly, both pairs of eyes casually watching scene after scene unfolding before them, a sense of calm monotony filling the rather admittedly dull motel room.

After watching her choice of film for no more than fifteen minutes, Loona began to feel a spell of fatigue begin to arise within her, her eyelids beginning to grow heavier as a growing desire to snooze made itself known. The increasingly relaxed hellhound rubbed her eyes with the tips of her fingers, blinking a couple times in an attempt to stay awake, not wanting to miss a second of the movie she found promising in the context of it being entertaining. It seemed that Loona’s attempt at staying awake was futile as she only grew more fatigued, prompting her to let out a whining dog-like yawn.

“Tuckered out over there?” Jim asked in a softened voice, turning his head leftwards to catch a glimpse of his eccentric roommate.

“Mmm..? N-No, I’m good… Just a little tired...” Loona says as her eyelids lowered further and further by the minute.

“Go to sleep will ya?” Jim quietly advised, gently prodding Loona to do what was right for her wellbeing; “You probably need it.”

“Yeah, well… m-my body can… can wait, I’m watching this garbage,” Loona protested while scratching the top of her head with her left hand, her right hand meekly gesturing to the TV screen.

Jim huffed with a soft smirk, turning his eyes back towards the movie; “Righto, mate.”

Yet, in spite of her insistence of watching the film she had been anticipating, Loona began to nod off further to her mild frustration; it appeared that her battle to stay awake was quickly going south. A couple more minutes go by, the desire to give herself the leisure of a nap only increasing in its intensity, the feeling soon too much for her to resist for much longer.

With a defeated sigh, Loona abruptly flopped onto her back against the mattress, landing with a light bounce as she positioned her head against the unbelievably soft pillows provided; the pillow case almost silky to the touch, making the desire to rest that much more tempting. With her now lying face-up towards the ceiling, Loona at last closed her eyes after one more exhausting yawn; the sleepy hellhound at last capitulating to the desire to slumber.

Tick… Tick… Tick… Tick…

An aging man sat dormant behind a desk in an office provided to him, staring off at nothing in particular with his right hand balled into a fist, supporting his chin. It had been no more than two or three days since this Private Investigator was called from his home in Toowoomba to help out in the investigation of a missing Morrisvale local by the name of “James Steele”.

The Private Investigator in question was one Vasily Georgyvich Antonov; the great-great grandson of a Slavic Exile from a widespread civil conflict which had largely been overlooked, if not widely forgotten. Vasily’s thick-bristled mustache and receding hairline showed obvious signs of his age; gray hair having since taken the spot where rich brownish-black hair once stood. His usually

analytical grayish-blue eyes stared off into space, his mind currently filled with passing thoughts regarding the investigation which was now largely his responsibility.

To his ever-growing annoyance, no progress had been made over the past forty-eight hours, the only information he had to work with was the missing man's house, a few spots of what was presumably his blood, a few bullet casings of low caliber, and some dirt-ridden paw prints of dubious origin — paw prints which he began to think had no real significance whatsoever.

"Gospodi, pomogi mne, ya ustal…" Vasily muttered to himself in a low and guttural voice, massaging his forehead with the palm of his weather-beaten left hand.

In a bid to pass the time in what was otherwise a long, drawn-out day, Vasily took this moment in time to himself to divert his attention towards a hat he had displayed on the rightmost side of his desk. The hat in question was an old white and reddish-pink service cap made of cotton, a black visor attached which signaled the "front" of this vintage headdress. A round orange and black cap badge sat in the center of the main frame of the hat, signifying its rank.

With a gentle hand, Vasily picked up the intriguing headdress before resting it delicately in his hands, his eyes analyzing every little detail it possessed. A sense of familial pride took hold of the aging man as he held what was in reality an important piece of personal memorabilia, and one which meant a lot to him on a personal level which was not to be underestimated.

Knock-Knock-Knock!

A polite knock on the door snaps Vasily out of his daydreaming, bringing him back to reality. The aging man returns the cap to where it originally sat, before clearing his throat and speaking.

"Come in."

The office door opened to reveal a woman dressed in her police service uniform. In her hands was a large black lever arch file which contained a few confidential documents.

"Afternoon, Vasily. Sorry to bother you," the woman politely replies, standing just in front of the doorway so as not to intrude any further than necessary.

“Not to worry, Sandra; you haven’t interrupted much. What brings you here?” Vasily inquired, his attention now fully swayed towards her.

“The Forensics Lab got back to us,” Sandra began to inform; “They delivered this about ten minutes ago. It’s the DNA results.”

“Is it now?” Vasily quietly asks, gesturing for the police woman to step inside

The police woman nods, approaching the Private Investigator’s desk and resting the file atop its surface; “Yep. They did what you asked them to; tested absolutely everything. Nothing’s been left unchecked, including a sample of those paw prints.”

“Mm. Good to hear,” Vasily mumbles.

“They also made a note about something in the results which stumped them.”

“Which is?”

“I don’t know. They didn’t really say, just that there was an anomaly which they couldn’t identify.”

“… Understood… I’ll be sure to look into it. Thank you, Sandra. You are dismissed.”

The visitor to the office abides by the dismissal, quietly exiting the room and carefully shutting the door behind her, leaving Vasily to his own devices.

At long last, Vasily was left alone with another no doubt crucial piece to this increasingly more complicated puzzle; the DNA results. For the entire day since meeting with the Police Commissioner in the capital city of the State of Queensland, he had been banking on these crucial results to provide to him the right answers which he seeked.

Wasting no time at all, the solitary Private Investigator got to work, grabbing the file and placing it in front of him, proceeding to then open the cover to reveal the documents newly provided to him. Waiting for him within was exactly what he was hoping for; the full complete results of the Forensics Tests, the results of which couldn't have been more than a day old. There were only three forensics examination sheets in total, detailing the major artifacts which had been found and going to great length to explain the methods which had been used to conjure such results.

The now fully attentive Private Investigator slid on a pair of reading glasses, letting out a brief yawn before reading the first document. This first document surrounded the blood stain samples, detailing the blood type and which part of the body it had most likely come from. It was a incredibly extensive document and one which was hard to read for the average casual reader, the wording of which and methodical sentences reserved for highly-trained professionals. Vasily wasn't interested in the smaller details as to what type of blood it was and where exactly it had come from; he was looking for names.

Alas, he had found it:

"DNA Match: Mr. James Henry Steele".

Exactly as Vasily had presumed.

Moving swiftly onwards with his review, Vasily set aside the first document and slid out the next in line; the low caliber bullet casings. There was yet more monotonous wording and tedious detailing filled in each section like the previous document, which prompted Vasily to merely scan over them, taking brief mental notes in the foreground of his mind. His eyes only lit up with intrigue when he found the name listed towards the bottom:

"DNA Match: Mr. Adrian Harrison Downes".

This was exactly what Vasily was hoping for; a firm, potential lead.

"Adrian Dauns, huh? Otlichnyy…"

A newfound sense of optimism arose within Vasily as he moved onto the next document, setting the previous two aside before passing on his unbridled attention to the third and last sample; the paw

prints. Now, Vasily wasn't entirely sure as to why he insisted on DNA results for these rather eccentric dirt-ridden paw prints. Perhaps it was out of curiosity? He wasn't entirely sure. It didn't matter, as now he had the definitive results for whatever wild animal had made these rather peculiar tracks in the first pla—

…

"DNA Match: Non-Applicable — Unidentifiable Large Canine Species".

The words printed in small, bold, and highlighted letters stuck out to the attentive Private Investigator, causing him to feel mildly intrigued, yet stumped. Vasily was a veteran in the field of Forensics and Criminal Investigations, having studied numerous cases over the years while collaborating with the Police Force. In all of his years of studying forensics and DNA tests of various origin, not once had Vasily ever seen a result such as this; let alone one which spoke of an "Unidentifiable Large Canine Species".

"Strannyy... Ochen' stranno…"

An uncanny sense of foreboding arose within the forefront of Vasily's puzzled thoughts; the veteran detective began to feel that perhaps there was something far more compelling to this particular case than was initially presumed. If anything, he felt compelled to investigate much further than he had originally intended.

That's when a thought appeared; the missing person's house. There had to be something more there, something he had to see; though Vasily didn't know what that "something" was.

Just yet.

Now motivated with this prompt to act of mysterious origin, the Private Investigator got up from his padded office chair, slipping his black Pea Coat over his neatly tucked dress shirt and making his way towards the door. Just as Vasily's hand grabs hold of the door handle, he freezes, a peculiar foreboding sensation prompting him to reconsider whether he should delve deeper into this disappearance.

It was the oddest sensation that the detective had ever felt in his life, though he had felt it before. It was an almost stabbing feeling, one which intruded upon his very being, causing an almost paralyzing chill to creep up his back. It was the feeling of being watched by an unseen force.

That's when he heard a voice.

"Papa..?"

Vasily gasps sharply as he spins himself around, a fight-or-flight response overtaking his body! With wide and terrified eyes, he scans the room for the apparent intruder, ready to confront them!

…

There was nobody there.

The usually reserved and collected Private Investigator was shaking with pure adrenaline, a few beads of accumulated sweat collecting upon his brow. His head throbbed from the terror he had just experienced, catching his hated breath before muttering to himself in a bid to calm himself down.

"B…bezumiye. Bezumiye… Y-Ya skhozhu s uma…"

After hastily gathering his usual collected nerve once more, Vasily sets off with car keys in tow, feeding into the nagging desire to learn more.

Forces Unseen

The mesmerizing yellow and orange glow of the mid-afternoon sun rays danced across the hood of the Private Investigator's Black Early 2000s Land Cruiser as the vehicle made headway towards the missing person's property. A low mechanical hum emanated from the Six-Cylinder Petrol Engine, filling the air with sound which would otherwise be absent of any noise. With his mind fixated on investigating further into the case which was unfolding with sheer mystery, Vasily glared with uncompromising focus at the road ahead as impatience began to take hold of him, desperate to dive further into the rabbit hole.

Hanging loosely and rattling against the interior rear view mirror was a small black rosary, clattering along with each imperfection in the road the vehicle made contact with. The remaining scent of a used "Black Ice" Air Freshener lingered in the air like the scent of burning tobacco, tinting the air with its potent, soothing smell. Vasily's thoughts, however, did not reflect the soothing, refreshing smell; his head instead was full of numerous possibilities of what he may find if he just looked a little deeper.

Out of all of his years in the field of professional private investigation, this particular case would most likely end up being his most morbidly captivating. The road to which Vasily traveled on was now heading in the westward direction, the outskirts of town having at last been reached, the missing person's home now roughly five-hundred meters away to the left. After much anticipation, in the distance positioned atop a slight hill was a spacious timber homestead, its aging roof lightly reflecting the sun rays which bounced off it like a dull, slightly rusted mirror. This is the exact same house which Vasily had been practically obsessing over for the past three days throughout his investigation, going over every little photograph and detail which was provided to him in earnest.

"Vozvrashcheniye v glubiny, huh? Mmm. Bozhe, pomogi mne…" Vasily muttered to himself in his native language, his eyes straining against the blinding hue of the afternoon sun, causing him to squint.

The Private Investigator slowed his vehicle down, indicating to the left in order to pull up into the dusty gravel driveway up towards the homestead, the ride made considerably rougher as soon as the tires made contact with the unpaved pathway. A few short one-hundred meters later, and Vasily had arrived up at the front of the homestead which was subject to intense investigation; the once welcoming and homely feeling it once had was reduced to an intense, eerie silence which nearly deafened, if not for the sounds of the native Lorikeets high up in a Eucalyptus Coolabah Tree.

An almost alien feeling of near paralyzing hesitation suddenly made itself known, causing Vasily to freeze for a few seconds; something felt off. He didn't know exactly where the source of this uninviting notion had come from, only that something was telling him that the scene he had arrived

at harbored something yet unseen. Vasily furrowed his brow, making a note of the foreboding feeling as he took this moment as an opportunity for a quick prayer – just in case. After a few seconds of reciting a short prayer to himself, and another minute of hesitant stagnation, Vasily let out a sigh and finally got out of the vehicle, bringing with him a Colt 1911 Pistol which was concealed within his long, dark pea coat.

The lone Detective's finely-polished black dress shoes stepped up onto the short flight of stairs up onto the long, stretching veranda; the floorboards creaking as soon as Vasily put his weight on the veranda proper. He made his way up towards the green front door, its lock having been replaced by local authorities since the original had been smashed in by an obvious break-in. Once more, the feeling of foreboding stagnation took hold of Vasily, making him reconsider his actions. A part of him wanted no more to do with this investigation, yet at the same time, something told him to keep going – to dive ever deeper. The green front door creaks open quietly, allowing the sunset to seep into the interior of this quaint timber homestead, the off-white interior walls revealed by the outside world's warm light.

Vasily's eyes gazed down at a most familiar yet now concerning sight; the large, dirt-ridden, canine-like paw prints staining the hallway's maroon carpet. Perhaps he didn't fully appreciate it beforehand when he made his initial observations, but the Detective couldn't help but stare with piqued interest at just how large the paw prints were, the length and width of which dwarfed his size-fourteen shoes by an extra few inches in both measurements.

Vasily scratched his chin in thought, trying to rationalize the source; "Mmm. Mozhet bol'shoy volk? Nyet… Nyet, chto-to drugoye..."

Walking further into the hallway, Vasily's stern and analytical eyes followed the tracks which led off down the hallway and to the right, directly into the living room, his gaze once more meeting with the crime scene itself, small yellow stands with numbers scattered about the room; ones which the Private Investigator had placed himself. Even after roughly four days since the apparent murder – successful or not – had taken place, that foul metallic smell still stained the atmosphere, causing Vasily to become slightly ill before quickly becoming adjusted to the scent once more.

As he had done so in his last visit, Vasily began sluggishly pacing around the humble living room deliberately, his eyes shifting around to observe his surroundings, eager to investigate further with a much keener eye. A thought within the back of this aging man's mind told him that there was something he needed to see, yet he was no closer to discovering what exactly that "something" was.

Suddenly, just out of his direct field of vision, he spots something accumulated on the hardwood floor, lightly reflecting in the light of the mesmerizing sunset. Upon seeing it, Vasily doesn't

hesitate to bend down and grab the minuscule clump in between his fingers, bringing it up towards his face. Immediately after taking a closer inspection, it was soon obvious to him what it was.

It was an accumulated clump of white and dark-gray hair, most likely from a type of dog.

Vasily squinted intently at the specimen held in his hand, trying to make head-or-tails of whatever he was holding. Of course, as "confirmed" by the forensics results, it most likely originated from some kind of animal of the canine variety; but of what type specifically? It must've been quite large, judging by the size of the bristly fur in conjunction with the sheer size of the paw prints out in the hallway.

But what would an animal of this presumed size be doing in a country it was most likely not native to, let alone at a crime scene?

Something was off...

Creeeak—

Vasily's ears pick up the ever-so-faint sound of the floorboards shifting under the weight of something in the hallway, causing him to freeze. He couldn't exactly determine if it was mere house noises or otherwise; no matter what the true source of the noise was, it definitely put the Private Investigator on edge.

Promptly, he lifts himself up off the ground and spins around to face the entrance into the hallway, putting himself in a position to fight as an act of self defense if need be. After a moment of alerted stagnation, Vasily works up the courage to speak.

"Hello? … Who goes there??"

No reply. Complete and utter silence.

"If anyone is in the hallway, know that I am armed! Don't you dare try anything with me, I will fire!"

Once again, no response.

This silence didn't provide Vasily with any form of comfort whatsoever, instead only filling him with a dread that he couldn't describe. Perhaps it was the fact that he was in the presence of a scene where someone likely died? No… this was a different type of dread; the feeling you get when you know you're being watched, with an unseen enemy just out of Vasily's line of sight, ready to strike him down if he made the wrong move. One word stuck out in his mind; a word which once it appeared refused to budge.

Wrong. Something was so incredibly wrong.

Vasily cautiously reaches into the depths of his pea coat with his right hand, grabbing hold of his Colt 1911 Pistol by the grip before pulling it out, not once diverting his attention away from the hallway, expecting the worst of what may come. That same continuous feeling of dread only grew larger as the deafening silence continued, a hint of tinnitus beginning to sound in Vasily's ears, compensating for the lack of atmospheric noise. At least thirty seconds had passed since the creaking sound and nothing had eventuated, leaving Vasily in a constant state of apprehensive caution which he knew couldn't last for much longer.

Vasily had two choices; either stay where he was in his constant state of vulnerability to wait for whatever presence was within his midst, or advance into the hallway to confront whoever — or whatever — had made itself known to him.

…

Ultimately, the lone Private Investigator chose the latter option.

With a hint of fear under his slightly shaky breath, Vasily silently mumbled to himself in a bid to stay completely quiet; "Gospodi pomogi mne…"

Putting on a brave and stern face, the aging man raised his pistol in order to be ready to fire, making his move by marching straight into the depths of the hallway, immediately to his left to confront…

…

The most terrifying being that he had ever seen in his life.

The abnormally tall, dark, shadowy figure looming directly over him; its vantablack silhouette absorbing the outside sunlight like an endless void. Its posture was completely upright, its shadowy, featureless head touching the ceiling in a testament to its freakish height. Although it had no eyes, nose, or mouth, a now fearfully paralyzed Vasily knew that it was looking directly at him.

The Detective was too stunned to react, an overwhelming sense of fear completely overtaking his body, his eyes widened in pure shock horror and his mouth slightly agape! Thankfully enough, Vasily managed to snap out of his fearful paralyzed state, aiming his pistol directly at the dreadful being's heat before firing as an act of desperate self defense!

"… OI, YEB—!!"

BANG—BANG—BANG!!!

<u>ROOOOOOAAAAAAGGHHHH!!!</u>

To Vasily's pure horror, the tall, lanky silhouette let out an ear-piercing and bellowing animalistic shriek, making his ears ring by the sheer volume of its apparently agonized cry! Before he has the chance to do anything else against the beyond frightening intruder, Vasily is pushed back into the floor by an unseen force, sending him tumbling upon the floorboards with a loud "THUMP"!

"YEBAT'! Y-YEBAT'!!"

With a sudden pain rushing through his entire body, Vasily tries to retreat, only to feel himself being dragged by an unseen force back towards the creature! This causes Vasily to panic even further, his voice bellowing and reverberating throughout the timber walls as he thrashed aimlessly!

"U—UBIRAYSYA!! NECHISTAYA VESHCH'!!"

By some miraculous turn of events, the unseen force's grip suddenly loosens and sets him free, allowing for Vasily to spin around to face his enemy! The Detective steadies his aim, his vision in a blur as he refocuses his eyes towards the dreaded humanoid creature, ready to fire!

Yet!…

…

Yet when Vasily looked back up to find the intruder, it was nowhere to be seen. The only suggestion that indicated that anything was there in the first place — human or not — was a slight wrinkle in the long maroon carpet of the hallway.

With a racing heart and bated breath, Vasily shakily huffed in overwhelming relief, cautiously optimistic that he had won the fight against whatever foul, unholy being he had just encountered. A noticeable throbbing pain was felt in the entire left side of his body, having been thrown against the ground and landing awkwardly against the floorboards. With the force to which he was thrown, Vasily found it miraculous that he hadn't broken anything; at least judging by a quick assessment of himself, able to move his arms and legs without much pain.

A pained wince emanated from Vasily as he lifted himself off the ground, using the nearby wall as support, at last catching his breath after somehow overcoming what he believed was supposed to be the cause of his demise. It didn't take long for the lightly beaten man to stand upright on his own two feet with all of his bodyweight, a shaky sigh of relief leaving his agape mouth, wiping the cold sweat from his wrinkled brow.

Now fully convinced that the coast was clear yet still shaken to a major extent, Vasily muttered to himself once more; "Huff— H-Hah… Huff… K-Kakogo cherta?? … C—Chto eto bylo?! Chto…? … B—Blyat…"

Without a second more, the clearly petrified Private Investigator rushed out of the accursed homestead and slammed the front door shut behind him, eager to completely leave the premises in case any other threat was imposed upon his person. While always looking over his shoulder in an act of justified paranoia, Vasily retreats into the relative safety of his Early 2000s Land Cruiser before turning the ignition key, allowing for the engine to roar back to life.

“Chto proiskhodit?? E-Eto bezumiye…” Vasily muttered to himself in his continuous alert state, turning the car around and heading right back into town, the little fur specimen from earlier resting within his pockets.

The sound of gently flowing water caused Loona to drearily open her eyes, groggily peeking through squinted eyelids to pinpoint the source visually. Her immediate assumption was that perhaps Jim had turned on a faucet in the bathroom, and that she would find him washing his face or something of the sorts. Truly, she didn’t know what she was expecting to see. The hellhound certainly wasn’t expecting to find what she did; a picturesque river surrounded by dense trees and a lusciously green riverbank.

Loona’s eyes blinked open to observe her surroundings, becoming rather confused as to her exact whereabouts, muttering to herself in a hushed tone of voice.

“W-What? … Where the hell…?”

Where exactly she was wasn’t entirely clear as of yet, though it was undeniable that the place where she now found herself was — in all instances of the word — rather beautiful. Loona found herself sitting down within the soft grasses of a grassy riverbank which was richly populated with flourishing plant life, the surrounding tree-dense wilderness populated with plentiful shrubbery and foliage of the colorful floral variety. A remarkably clear river lay before her, its crystal-clear blue water gently flowing further downstream at a delicately slow pace, a sense of urgency nowhere to be seen. If anything, time appeared to “stand still” in this new unfamiliar environment in a peaceful sort of way.

Loona furrowed her brow, trying to figure out where exactly she was while in a state of perplexion. She gets up from the ground, lifting herself up onto her feet before dusting herself off a little, examining her surroundings for a sense of direction. It didn’t take Loona too long to notice that off into the distance to her right was a bridge made of stone stretching across both sides of the riverbank; a light moss covering parts of the stonework in an indication of how long it had stood there for. Lo and Behold, standing within the center of the stone bridge itself was a “familiar” face, his gray Homburg hat and white beard standing out against the long black coat he wore.

Immediately after noticing the man, Loona realized that she was dreaming.

“Huh… go figure…”

Promptly, Loona decided to approach the bridge, finding her way through the trees and towards the erected stone structure. To her surprise, the hellhound didn’t find it too difficult to navigate through the woodland towards the bridge, finding that there was an adequate makeshift pathway from her location which led to a gravel pathway connected to the bridge. As soon as her feet made contact with the gravel, Loona made a sharp left towards the bridge directly in front of her, stepping onto the structure to find the familiar sub-guardian waiting for her in all of his elderly “glory”.

With a slight wave and a slight, humble smile, Gunther greets Loona upon her arrival, watching the hellhound approach him.

“Ah, Herrin Loona! A good afternoon to you.”

Loona was just about to answer before she froze, a confused look appearing on her face; “… What did you just call me?”

“I titled you ‘Herrin’,” Gunther immediately informs politely; “It is a very similar title to the likes of “miss” and such in the English language. An honorary, formal title if you will.”

The hellhound hesitates, trying to process the definition just thrown her way before nodding slowly; “Right. Don’t call me that.”

Gunther let out a soft, understanding smile before obliging; “Very well. I would like to apologize for the inconvenience of our meeting today. I understand you are attempting to relax in the aftermath of the recent events to which you have been confronted with. Rest assured that this isn’t a crucial meeting; rather a check-up to find out how you are traveling.”

Loona scoffs lightly as she folds her arms; “You got the “inconvenient” part right, that’s for sure. Okay, fine. Let’s get this over with.”

“Very well, if you are indeed ready. So! Do inform me; How are you getting on?”

“Fine, I guess.” Loona begins, perhaps forcing herself to speak once more to the elderly figure; “Things have been… eventful. It’s hard, but we’re somehow managing – just about. Just had Verosika discover that I’m protecting Jim and now she’s threatening to spread the word all over hell.”

“Is that so?”

Loona nods as she leans against the parapet to her left, crossing her legs casually; “Yup. So now I’m paranoid that she’ll run her mouth off and endanger all of us, all because of her grudge with dad. Is she actually gonna say anything? No idea. Guess we’ll just have to wait and see.”

“I understand that isn’t good news,” Gunther notes to Loona.

“Pfuh. Yeah, no shit…” Loona mumbled quietly, finding the observation painfully obvious.

“And how is the health of young James Steele?”

Loona briefly scratches her left forearm as she answers; “He’s doing okay, both physically and mentally. Thank fu— I mean, t-thank goodness. I’ve taken him out for the day back up into the living world. Like a little getaway from all the mess. We’ve just been… I dunno, hanging out, watching movies, having drinks. You know, all that kinda stuff. It’s been very chill.”

“What coaxed you in making the decision to return to the living world?”

Loona sighed abruptly, turning her eyes back towards the “sub-guardian” after glancing downstream; “You sound like you’re interrogating me, you know that? Okay, listen. Long story short, dad and I had a fight and now we need some time apart. He really got on my nerves today. Let me guess; you wanna know why.”

The sharply-dressed individual standing before Loona shrugged weakly; “Only if you wish to explain such a sensitive detail, as I understand that it is.”

What did he just say?

“Wait… You already know what happened?” Loona asked in a mildly baffled tone, perhaps jumping to conclusions too early; “And you’re here asking me for answers to questions you already know? … What game are you playing with me, old man??”

“You’ve misunderstood my choice of words. I would kindly ask that you refrain from becoming aggressi–”

“No! Fuck that!”

The hellhound was having none of this, interrupting Gunther halfway through his sentence; “You already know what happened between me and dad, and you have the BALLS to ask me how it happened?? You’re rubbing salt into an open wound, that’s what you’re doing! It’s like you find some sick fucking enjoyment in these stupid meetings of ours; having me explain my problems to you before you piss off and tell whoever your “bosses” are!”

In spite of Loona’s surprising outburst, the elderly specter refused to give Loona the satisfaction of responding in-kind; “Forgive me for saying such, but you have seriously misunderstood what my function is. I am not a psychic. I myself do not hold the ability to read minds, nor can I familiarize myself with situations before I am told of them. I am only a messenger between two parties. I am here to give you the support and sufficient information that you are in need of.”

Loona let out a disbelieving huff; “Support?? What support?! All you’ve done these past two “meetings” is stick your nose in my business! This is my battle to fight – MINE! And mine alone! I don’t need the likes of you coming to me and throwing your goddamn weight around! I don’t need some glorified therapist to hold my hand!”

Instead of the look of intense anger that Loona was expecting from the “glorified therapist” standing before her, she noticed that within his eyes which must’ve seen decades upon decades was a look of passive understanding.

Loona’s demeanor went from that of anger to that of confusion; “W–What the hell’s that look for??”

Gunther let out a soft exhale before speaking; “I can tell that you are most troubled.”

“Of course I’m troubled, genius! I have the weight of the world on my shoulders and I’m bearing this responsibility on my own! There’s… and there’s nobody who can physically help me. Not that anybody would want to anyway…”

“But haven’t I? Hasn’t Master Steele, when he saved you from your most certain demise?”

Loona rolls her eyes; “Okay, yes! But Jim’s different. We’re suffering together through this. I mean outside help! Like actual intervention! It’s obvious you can’t or won’t actually help either! All you’ve done is point me towards some trees and left me to figure out where the fuck it actually is! So, you know… looks like I gotta do this alone.”

There is a moment of silence which fell upon the hellhound and the specter, the sounds of their surrounding nature quickly taking over from the lively conversation which had just taken place. This was until the “sub-guardian” broke the silence.

“Would it perhaps help if I explained why I am not permitted to provide the details of exact locations?”

“It wouldn’t help me out at all, but it would be good to know.” Loona conceded bluntly, a slither of near-desperate hope emerging within her mind; perhaps the information her “guardian” was about to provide would end up giving her decent insight.

Sure enough, Gunther began to explain himself.

“I have bore witness to almost three centuries of history, Miss Loona. What I have witnessed, as I have aforementioned, is much more than I was ever willing to bear witness to. As I am sure you are aware from our last meeting, I am most familiar with the entities which you are having to confront. Almost identical situations such as yours have occurred before, and it has been my responsibility for the longest time to ensure that those forces are limited in their effectiveness to cause suffering.”

“Allow me to recall to you one specific case which eventuated to a most pitiful, dreadful conclusion. There was a curious young gentleman who I shan’t name for the sake of his privacy who was perhaps no older than yourself. Unfortunately for the young lad, he had gotten himself curious in the practice of black magic, binding his very soul to entities which lust for the souls of mankind through sacrifices; these are the exact same forces to which you deal with. Every so often,

they crave the soul of a being to rejuvenate their lives, to keep them from withering away. This requires a "host" to commit to a sacrifice of another being of its kind."

A look of awful realization began to appear on Loona's face, horrified about the connection she had made within her head; "Hold up a second. … Oh shit… M-Malloy wants to make a sacrifice for these things?"

"That is why I have come to help you to my utmost ability. The responsibility is yours to do what is right; to disrupt the cycle. I assure you, from what I have been told thus far, that you are most certainly traveling in the right direction," Gunther confirms with a serious look in his blue eyes.

The specter continues his retelling; "Unfortunately for the young lad to which I speak of, he doubted the forewords of caution I delivered to him, though I tried for many days in desperation to coax him into listening. … I am not exactly sure what came of him, though if recounts of other cases to which I have witnessed are accurate in every instance, then I'm afraid he has since entered an eternity of endless suffering. … I do not wish to detail the means to how he suffers, for it causes me much discomfort."

Loona's eyes shifted in serious thought in what she was being told, processing everything all at once; "That still doesn't explain why you can't tell me exact locations. It's beginning to sound like you're fucking with me at this point."

The hellhound watched on in mild confusion as Gunther grew visibly uncomfortable, his usually calm and serious demeanor turning into that of sorrow. He bites his bottom lip before speaking once more, his voice hoarse and full of regret.

"Because I made a grave mistake. They knew he was coming…"

Loona grew curious, if not concerned by the concerning comment; "… What?"

"Understand that there is a much graver danger than you truly realize, Miss Loona. I do not make that statement lightly," Gunther warns with a deeply serious look upon his face — perhaps the most serious she had ever seen from him thus far; "The ancient specters which are connected to these black magic practices are like nothing either myself or the powers that be have ever seen before or since. They represent a beyond sinister force which is perhaps older than the earth itself, hunting silently and methodically."

“I had been informed in the aftermath of that case that after I had told the young lad the precise location of their metaphorical “hive”, he had disappeared off this plain of existence into an uncharted realm in the deepest pits of hades; far deeper than the realm from where you originate, if not on a completely different plain of existence entirely. Turns out that because of my naivety and my moment of incompetency, I failed to realize that he wasn’t ready to confront them. That is why I haven’t told you exactly where their latest “hive” is located; for your own safety. You are not ready just yet.”

“From what I have gathered, they work on a timely basis, only striking at a specific moment when they feel the time and the situation is to their advantage. That is why you haven’t seen them as of yet; they are merely observing, performing a form of reconnaissance. … But they grow impatient. There will be a time where they feel it is right to consume another being to which has been offered through a sacrifice. Even if a sacrifice hasn’t been made, they will find a way to pursue their promised offering. … As I have aforementioned, you too are in great danger, for you are standing in the way of what they desire. To completely eradicate the danger of which I speak of, you must find the “hive” and destroy it, for that will banish them back to whence they came.”

If Loona wasn’t already feeling apprehensive, she certainly was now, an internal pressure upon her head beginning to make itself apparent. Arising within Loona was a bout of near intense hopelessness, causing her to feel weak within her knees. She resorts to leaning up against the parapet with her head in her hands, her squinted eyes beginning to harbor tears.

“This is hopeless. It’s all so goddamn hopeless…” Loona whines pitifully, feeling a sense of great despair to an extent that she hadn’t felt before.

“I wouldn’t despair if I were you, Miss Loona,” Gunther reassures in the form of some advice.

Upon hearing this utterly bizarre statement, Loona raised her head up from her hands and looked towards the aging specter, her eyes narrowed to a baffled squint.

“You’re kidding me, right?” Loona asks in a blunt, serious tone; “I shouldn’t despair?? Look at the situation I’m in! As you just said not even a minute ago! I’m at risk of suffering for eternity at the hands of whatever ancient creature wants my neck, all because I want to protect someone I care about! How can I NOT despair??”

The elderly gentleman blankly stared at Loona in silence for a moment in thought to himself, taking a slow breath in and out before speaking.

“I don’t suppose you know where we are standing, Miss Loona?”

Loona scoffed loudly; “Of course not! You keep bringing me to places which I’ve never seen before in my life!”

Gunther nodded his head softly; “This centuries old stone structure to which we stand upon is a bridge which crosses The River Isar. Not too far from where we stand, if you proceed northwards, is the most gorgeous city of Munchen. … I died here, upon this exact spot to which I stand.”

This spontaneous revelation piqued Loona’s attention, causing her to feel taken aback. If anything, she was left somewhat speechless, unsure of what to reply with. Ultimately, Loona decided against speaking any further, instead choosing to listen to see where this was going.

As expected, Gunther continued the retelling of his fate; “If I am permitted to express my utmost honesty to you, I can say that I was not the most optimistic of men in my older years. There was much misery to which I couldn’t help but fall victim to. My mother had died of tuberculosis, and my father from a bout of sudden pneumonia when I was at the youthful age of seventeen. I had no true home and no family throughout my lonesome adulthood. I had to travel frequently because of my apprenticeship and later profession as a doctor, in an age where medicine was so incredibly novel and difficult to access, even to the wealthiest of nobles like myself. I was alone, perhaps a hermit in one form or another. Sometimes I wondered if anyone knows what that feels like; to have nobody to turn to. To not have a home to retreat to.”

Loona became rather pensive, if not oddly sympathetic in reaction to this retelling, causing her to make a solemn comment; “I suffered for a long time in a hellhound adoption center. I know that it feels like to be completely alone, in a world where nobody couldn’t give less of a shit about you.”

The elderly specter gave off a weak smile, blinking a couple of times as he continued speaking; “There is much to struggle for in one’s life; that much I have learnt. My own momentous struggle continued up until the very end. I had contracted a horrid disease in the spring, and by that point I was already a weakened old man. While traveling on the open road between townships heading northwards, I felt myself weakening and waning to such an extent which I had never experienced before, and I was sure that my time had come. Therefore, I decided to rest.”

Gunther points his left hand towards the ground, near the parapet; “I got off my horse to which I had rode for many years, staggered myself towards this patch of ground and rested against this stone parapet. I knew that death would soon arrive, and with no desire to suffer for much longer in my chronically suffering earthly existence… I let death take me away from my most decrepit body. Do you understand what had ultimately killed me, Loona? … Despair. Though typhoid took my life away, it was my very soul which was tainted with pessimism, eradicating any form of determination which I had left. Let my earthly demise be a warning to you. If you let your own despair dictate how you react, it will be your downfall as mine was. Rest assured that you still have ample time to confront what you face. Myself and the powers that be have enough confidence in believing that you will win. … Unfortunately, to achieve this ultimate victory takes great patience.”

“I wish I did have patience,” Loona admitted in all seriousness, the look in her eyes giving off a hint of momentary exhaustion combined with frustration; “But I don’t. I want this over and done with, do you understand? Why does this have to be so fucking hard..?”

After a brief second of stagnation upon thinking about Loona’s somber inquiry, Gunther provides his response; “Sometimes I ask myself the same question.”

An inadequate response to a pressing question, no doubt about it; yet Loona couldn’t help but feel an unusual sense of comfort in the fact that someone perhaps more powerful than herself was just as clueless as she was. Sure enough, both the hellhound and the specter fell into a pensive silence, letting the ambience of the delicately flowing water below them fill the air with sound.

That was until Loona’s ears picked up the sound of something into the distance, right behind her.

The suddenly alerted hellhound turns herself around to look into the direction where the path stretched onwards, the road veiled in overarching shadows casted by the ancient, towering pine trees. It was an incredibly faint sound, and one which Loona couldn’t exactly decipher. Her scarlet-red eyes fixate to the distance in a bid to pinpoint the intrusive sound’s source.

“Is everything okay, Miss Loona?” Gunther asks quietly, growing curious of the hellhound’s sudden alertness.

Loona raises her hand to tell the “sub-guardian” to be quiet, the open palm balling up into a fist before she raises her finger, trying to familiarize herself with the curious noise; “... Do you hear that?”

In a rather unsettling development, the sound seemed to grow louder, as if the source of the noise was surely approaching. Despite the unknown sound growing in its volume, the source or the culprit was still nowhere to be found. It takes Loona only a few seconds to figure out what exactly this peculiar disturbance was, but when she figured it out, it caused her to feel most uneasy.

It was the sound of a voice – that of a man – wailing in agonizing grief.

Loona wakes up suddenly, gasping a little from being jolted awake, finding herself back within the confines of the motel room. She found herself lying upwards towards the ceiling while sprawled out comfortably on the sheet-covered mattress of her bed.

A familiar voice sounds off to her immediate right; “Had a good nap?”

The freshly awake hellhound sat upright upon the mattress before pivoting her head to the right, finding Jim sitting on the side of his respective bed.

Loona groans a little while blinking, rubbing her eyes gently; “Nnnngh… M-Maybe..? I don’t know.”

“You okay?” Jim asks further as an act of courtesy for Loona’s well-being.

The hellhound waved her hand weakly in dismissal of the human’s concern; “I’m fine, don’t worry. Just had a fucked-up dream, that’s all.”

“Another one?”

“Yup,” Loona swiftly replied, giving her arms a stretch behind her head; “I don’t feel like talking about it right now.”

“Fair enough,” Jim obliges, abiding by Loona's wishes; “You still wanna watch this movie? I paused it for you while you were asleep.”

Loona rubbed her eyes as she looked towards the TV screen, finding that the movie hadn’t progressed far from where she had left off, the frame paused and waited for her attention once more. The hellhound thought about the offer, wanting to relax once more; or as best she could after the anxiety-inducing information that she had just received, that mysterious German specter’s voice still echoing in her mind. A feeling of temporary comfort appeared when she thought about the “messenger’s” reassurance that she still had ample time, relieving the sense of rising urgency.

As Gunther had emphatically stated; “To achieve the ultimate victory takes great patience”.

The hellhound wisely chose to do good by this advice.

After a moment of stagnation, Loona sighed gently while nodding her head with a light smile, turning her head back towards Jim to accept the offer; “Sure. Let’s finish it.”

Dark Is The Night

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"... How did you find me?"

"I'm the man."

"... One more thing, Sophie. Is she aware her daughter is still alive?"

A symphony of trumpets began playing as the credits signaled the end of Loona's choice of film, the crisp white letters which read "Written and Directed by Quentin Tarantino" flashing upon the screen, at last bringing the film to its ultimate conclusion. To say the absolute least, the past One Hour and Fifty Minutes runtime had been an interesting viewing experience for both Loona and her human companion who had tried their hardest to make heads-or-tails as to what exactly was unfolding on-screen. Now that the movie was — after much anticipation — over, both viewers could now give their summarizing verdicts on the piece of media which they had just watched in full.

Jim was the first to speak, blinking a couple of times while trying to process the movie; "R-Right. That was definitely somethin'. … Uhh… How about you, Loona? Whatcha make of all that?"

Loona didn't immediately reply with her own verdict, instead resorting to staring in utter confusion at the screen with her mouth slightly agape. It didn't take long for the hellhound to give her most honest verdict, snapping out of her almost stunned state; "… What the hell was all that about??"

Jim let off a cackle with a parted grin; "That's what you wanted to watch! Whatcha think?"

"I-I don't even know WHAT to think!" Loona exclaims in a baffled fashion; "People find that garbage entertaining?!"

"Hey! You said you liked mindless violence and slashers!"

“Uh, yeah I do! The ones that make sense plot wise!” Loona corrects Jim’s assumption; “That was just a whole lot of dogshit! You know what? I take back what I said about your stupid war movie. At least that one made sense!”

Jim smirked wider, finding Loona’s harsh critique entertaining; “So you reckon that was all hot sewage?”

“Without a doubt!” Loona emphatically confirms; “Hell, I’d rather chug my own cold hangover vomit than watch another second of whatever that was again!”

The young bushman decides to prod Loona further; “You can’t be that harsh on it, matey! It’s gotten rewards in the past!”

This took Loona by genuinely bewildered surprise, almost disorientating her; “I… Wh— People gave that mess awards?! Holy shit, are people actually that brainless??”

“You’re not the first to presume that,” Jim assured while chuckling through his grinning teeth; “Suppose we have one last movie left though! It’s that… romance film you wanted to subject me to. Wanna give it a squiz?”

“Meh. Maybe later, I need a break,” Loona replies, rubbing her temple with her hand; “Uff… That visual barf gave me a migraine…”

“Try going outside, clear ya head,” Jim offers a constructive suggestion; “That sunset to the west’s bloody gorgeous.”

Loona turns her attention towards the curtain-veiled window behind the TV, her scarlet-red eyes observing the near mesmerizing orange hue which beamed through the crack in the drawn curtains.

The hellhound, under the spell of a slight, temporary migraine, heaved herself up from her bed before stretching her arms with a groan; “Nngh! Yeah, that’s not a bad idea. Gotta wash my face first, I feel crusty.”

With her intentions announced, Loona sluggishly made her way into the bathroom, her paws making contact against the tiles which sent a chill through her legs, assisting Loona in coming out of her “crusty” feeling. Loona makes her way over to the pearly white sink, the bathroom mirror displaying her face right back at her, showing the hellhound exactly what she looked like. Contrary to what Loona had first presumed, she was pleasantly — albeit mildly — surprised to find that she didn’t look all that terrible. Sure, her hair was somewhat tangled from her sleep a few hours ago and looked akin to a bird’s nest, yet it didn’t look as horribly messy as she originally presumed. Her face wasn’t in that bad of a state either; her eyeshadow was still somewhat flawless with a few imperfections which weren’t all that noticeable. Her white and dark gray fur still looked neatly combed, albeit with a few ruffled patches which could easily be corrected with the brush provided to her right.

In spite of her decent outward appearance, Loona smirked before chuckling to herself, deciding to give herself a bit of self-depreciative humor; “Damn, Loona, look at yourself. You look like hot garbage. Eugh, gross.”

Loona promptly turned the “cold” faucet handle anti-clockwise, allowing for the tap to begin spilling a delicate flow of cold water, the sound of which filled the bathroom with a light trickling sound which was gentle on her ears. Loona cups her hands together and holds them underneath the running stainless steel faucet, allowing for the water to begin gently pooling into her hands, the sheer chill of the water freezing her hands slightly. With enough accumulated water within her cupped hands, Loona proceeds to splash it onto her face before rubbing it all in carefully, allowing for the water to soak into her fur, dripping down her muzzle and back into the sink. Gradually with each repeat of this menial task, Loona began to feel far more refreshed compared to how she was just minutes ago. In tandem, this served to improve her mood by a considerable margin, returning once more to becoming properly relaxed.

“You ever get that feeling, Jim?” Loona calls out from the bathroom, giving herself one last refreshing face wash.

Jim responds without a second’s delay; “What feeling?”

“Where you just feel gross about yourself,” Loona elaborates, rubbing some water into her eyes before grabbing a nearby towel; “It’s that feeling when you’re tired and your face reflects that.”

“Errr… Yeah nah, sometimes!” Jim calls back in his Australian drawl; “Why, you feelin’ like that?”

“I was a little!” Loona answers as she dried her fur off, giving herself a scratch behind her ears; “I’m feeling better now, so you won’t get to see my bitchy side toda— Oh for fuck sakes!”

“You alright in there??”

“I just ruined my eyeshadow!” Loona explained in mild frustration, the hellhound marching out of the bathroom and towards her bed where her backpack sat waiting.

Quickly, the hellhound retrieves her makeup kit before retreating back into the privacy of the bathroom, placing the foundations on the bathroom sink before beginning the tedious process of applying her eyeshadow once more.

“Heaven forbid the eyeshadow gets ruined,” Jim wittingly comments from outside the main room, his voice reflecting a cheeky grin.

“Oh piss off, Jim, you’re not a woman! You wouldn’t understand.” Loona quips right back, lightly applying foundation just above her eyes.

“Nah, that’s a point,” Jim concedes from his bed, a soft chuckling emanating from the main room which Loona heard. Jim’s voice sounds off again, this time with another question; “So how long does it take to do ya eyeshadow then?”

Loona was only paying half attention, focusing on applying her makeup with precision, careful not to make a mistake; “… What?”

“Your eyeshadow,” Jim repeats himself; “How long does it take to apply?”

“If I’m using the expensive stuff I got at home, it takes up to an hour,” Loona informs the inquirer; “This cheaper shit I got now? Probably about five minutes or less. All depends if I can apply it well enough on the first try.”

“Yeah right. Is it harder because you’re applying it on ya fur?”

“It pisses me off whenever it runs,” Loona states in a half-attentive manner, at last making the finishing touches on her left eye and moving on to her right; “Like.. especially if it’s hot.. and it runs down my fur and gets fucking everywhere. Gotta be careful with this cheaper garbage because if I apply it wrong, it smudges and looks like pure crap.”

“Gotcha,” Jim’s voice calls from his bed, the motel room becoming silent once more, leaving Loona to apply her makeup with the utmost of her concentration.

With every precise and intricate movement, the hellhound manages to delicately apply her dark-gray eyeshadow with each individual application, having to use a handful of brushes she had on hand in order to produce adequate results. If anything, the somewhat menial and monotonous task of applying makeup put Loona’s mind further at ease; the feeling of freshening herself up giving her a renewed sense of calm and composure. With a careful hand, Loona daubs the brush against her right eyelid, ensuring with utmost certainty that the application of her eyeshadow was as flawless as she could manage. After a few more minutes of concentration, the process of reapplying her makeup was at last complete; the hellhound setting her brush down upon the sink before checking herself out in the mirror.

To Loona’s honest surprise, it seemed that the job she had performed was far better than she had anticipated, if not an improvement compared to anything she had done before. There was something so blissfully mesmerizing with how the eyeshadow blended in with the rest of her face, giving off a completely natural look about her. Loona’s irises dilated slightly as she fell in pure love with the results, staring into the mirror with pure satisfaction. The hellhound, proud of herself, decided to promptly take a photo of herself in the mirror – there was no way she wasn’t going to show off this near flawless result.

Loona took a few steps back away from the bathroom mirror, flicking her phone on with the camera open, ready to take a picture of herself. She raises the phone upright with her finger hovering over the shutter button, ready to take a photo at a moment’s notice. Loona struck a nonchalant pose complete with a smirk, before at last taking a picture.

Click!

The camera processes the mirror selfie taken by its owner, loading it in after less than a second. Loona brings the camera back towards her face, judging the photo she took. A satisfied grin formed on Loona’s muzzle, finding that her selfie was up to her desired standard; her near-perfect eyeshadow in full view for everyone to see. The light pose that she struck only added to the overall “gothic sass” feeling that Loona was aiming for.

“Huh… I actually look hot. Not bad, Loona. Not bad at all,” Loona quietly compliments herself, absolutely proud of how she looked.

Loona wasted no time at all to share the selfie on her Sinstagram, adding a summarized description to accompany the photo.

Human World Vibes. <3 #EyeshadowCheck

“Hey, Loona mate!”

Jim’s voice called out from the main room as soon as Loona posted her selfie.

“Yeah, what is it?” Loona calls right back, lightly combing her fur with her fingers to correct any imperfections.

“Have a look at this out here!” Jim invited, obviously finding interest in something he had found.

Loona began packing away her makeup kit as she prepared to exit the bathroom; “What have you found? I swear, if its another one of those spiders!”

“Nah nah, don’t worry! Pretty sure it’s a doll.”

The hellhound froze for a second, furrowing her brow; “A doll?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s it look like?”

“Uhh.. It looks like a horse.”

Loona’s eyes shot wide open, a sense of embarrassment overtaking her mind in an instant.

“Holy sh– NOTHING!! It’s nothing!!”

Loona came sprinting frantically right out of the bathroom before sliding to a stop against the carpet, her eyes wide and panicky! She stared wide-eyed at the bewildered human who held something within his hands; it was a small plush, which represented the likeness of a beige horse, its mane made of dark brown string.

Jim gave off a baffled laugh, deeply confused as to why Loona was acting this way; “Jesus, easy there! Hah– W-What’s up with ya?”

The clearly embarrassed hellhound says nothing, her eyes wide and her posture unnaturally upright as if she had been stunned. Loona opens her mouth to speak, her jaw moving slightly in a bid to muster a sentence, the effort of which proving futile as no words came out.

Jim glanced down towards the plush toy in his hands, raising it up in the air slightly; “I-Is this what you’re panicky ov–”

“YES!” Loona suddenly blurted out, her voice tight and rigid as a blush formed across her face, practically glowing through her fur.

“Why’s that?? Calm your farm, it’s just a–”

Loona suddenly bounded across the room and snatched the small horse plush directly out of Jim’s hands! She then twirled around and shoved it abruptly into her backpack, all the while her face was completely flushed with near crippling embarrassment. Loona stagnates for a few seconds before pivoting back around, glaring at Jim with an annoyed yet still embarrassed look.

She begins interrogating, stammering awkwardly; “W-Where did you find this?!”

Jim puts up his hands to help calm Loona down; “It was on the floor! Fell outta your bag when you got ya eyeshadow. Yanno, you really don’t have to be embarrassed over it!”

“Yes I do!” Loona snapped defensively; “Look at me! I-I’m a grown ass woman and I’m carrying a stupid plush around!”

“Oh come off it, Loona; it’s not stupid!”

“Yes it is, quit lying! It’s not gonna make me feel any better!”

“Who gave it to ya?”

“... D-Dad did! W-When he adopted me, he gave it to me as a “welcome home” present.” Loona quietly admits, rubbing her forearm in discomfort.

“Did ya name it?”

Loona shot Jim a baffled look; “What? Of course I didn’t! I’m not a puppy anymore!”

To the flustered hellhound’s annoyance, the young man didn’t appear convinced who gave her a knowing look, non-verbally prodding her to reveal the plush’s name.

“Jim, I swear! I haven’t named it, I promise!”

The human’s knowing look remained steadfast, showing no signs of fading; “What did ya name it~?”

…

“... Thorn…”

A wide toothy grin spread across Jim’s face, finding this revelation oddly adorable; “Aw, her name’s ‘Thorn’, Ay?”

Loona scowled defensively in further near excruciating embarrassment, the feeling of which showing no signs of dissipating; “Yes, I named it Thorn! Just.. Don’t mock me for having this around, okay??”

Jim waved his hand in dismissal of this concern; “As if I would! It’s fine, it’s cute if anything! It obviously holds sentimental value to ya, I’m not gonna put someone down for that. If I did, you’d eat me alive.”

“Hmph. Got that right,” Loona quietly states as she fidgets; “… Is that bad though?”

“What?”

“Quit playing dumb, you know what. Me, owning a plush at my age; Is that bad?”

“Nah, far from it!” Jim reassures with utmost enthusiasm; “It means something to ya! You do you, yanno? It’s like me with my Lee Enfield; I love that old rifle! Just wish I could get it back, actually.”

“Yeah, but that’s a gun! You know, something useful,” Loona argues; “Thorn— I mean, this dumb stuffed toy just sits around and stares. It’s a literal deadweight!”

“But you love it, don't ya?” Jim asks with a lighthearted smile.

Loona blushes lightly, looking down towards the floor while attempting to put on a stern expression with little success; “No! I mean— m-maybe? I don’t know… Alright, fine! Yes, I cherish it! Now stop asking please, it’s really embarrassing for me.”

“Righto mate. … Look, one last request though.”

Loona groans a little just as she was about to look through her sinstagram, looking back towards Jim and giving him permission to speak; “Ask away.”

“Can I look at it again for a minute? Maybe… give her a hold?” Jim quietly requests, a nervous grin appearing on his lips.

The hellhound’s inconvenienced mindset turned into that of mild confusion, cocking her head to the side; “And why should I let you do that?”

One thing that Loona took slight notice of was the subtle change to Jim’s tone of voice, a hint of weakness appearing through the question he asked.

Jim shrugged; “Dunno really. It just kinda felt nice to look at. Almost calming.”

Now Loona was even more curious, a part of her telling her that something was off with how her roommate carried his voice. Something told her that maybe it was best to give Jim another go.

She cocked her head to the side with one eyebrow raised in mild confusion; “Uhh, yeah. They tend to do that to people — plushies I mean. … You know what? Sure. You can hold it again. I’ll tell you once, and I won’t warn you again; Be. Gentle. Got it?”

Jim nodded in utter compliance, agreeing to the conditions.

A short spell of hesitancy caused Loona to freeze for a mere few seconds before she sighs, reaching back into her backpack and pulling the stuffed horse plush. She examines the stuffed toy which she held dear to herself, looking into its black beady eyes as she briefly reminisced about the past five years she had spent living with that certain overzealous imp she called her ‘dad’.

After staring at it for no more than five seconds, Loona looks back up towards her roommate before handing “Thorn” over to him; “Here. Just be careful, there’s a tear on its neck.”

Upon handing over the horse plush, Loona kept watch for any movement from Jim which could damage her secretive prized possession, almost like a mother watching out for the safety of its offspring. To her cautious relief, Loona observed as Jim began holding the plush by the bottom and letting it rest within the palm of his hand, obviously abiding by Loona's stern warning.

"How'd that tear end up there?" Jim casually asks, briefly looking upwards towards Loona before looking back down towards the plush cradled in his hands.

Loona shrugs; "Beats me. Probably got snagged somewhere in my room. I don't usually take it out of my room because, well, it's embarrassing. Guess I put it in my bag by accident."

Jim hummed in a monotone way in response to Loona, his eyes unequivocally focusing on the horse plush. That's when Loona noticed the human's eyes; they looked as if they held a sense of sobriety within them, as if he was reminiscing. The hellhound grew more perplexed upon noticing this; it was mere moments ago did she notice that hint of somberness, though she didn't pay much attention to it.

Loona's confusion only grew in its intensity when she noticed Jim beginning to purse his lips, along with his eyes blinking more frequently than usual.

That's when Loona decided to break the silence; "You good there?"

"... Hm?" Jim looked up, his face looking that bit more glum than usual.

It was now painfully obvious to Loona that something was up; "What's wrong with you? You got a look in your eyes."

Jim attempted to act none the wiser; "... Wh… W-What look?"

Loona rolls her eyes; "Dude, come on. Don't play stupid with me. Something's up with you."

To the hellhound's mild annoyance, Jim waved his hand in dismissal of her concern; "It's nothing, don't worry about it. Just reminiscing."

Upon hearing this self-admission, Loona grew ever curious, further prodding her roommate; "About?"

"Just… something from back home," Jim elaborates, his eyes diverting back towards the plush toy as his voice cracked faintly.

That was when Loona noticed something which made her even more concerned; his eyes, developing a watery look, further confirming the perplexed hellhound's suspicions.

Loona sighs a little before speaking; "Go on, tell me."

"... Tell you what?"

"You're not stupid, Jim. You know what I'm referring to," Loona says, leaning forward as she sat down on the side of her bed, reading eye-level with the human; "What's wrong?"

…

"I never told you that I had a sister, have I?"

This sudden question caused Loona to blink in surprise, mildly taken aback by the question; "Wh– No??"

A somber-sounding exhale sounded off from the young man. Loona didn't know what to say, completely at a loss as to what could be bothering this usually easy-going person — though she began to form conclusions, each of them as depressing as the last. For the time being, Loona chose to be quiet, anticipating a proper explanation… which came soon enough.

“I had a sister,” Jim began with a reminiscent look on his face; “Her name was Madeline, or “Maddie” we usually called her. Thing is that I’m a middle child; my brother’s the oldest — he’s about five years older than myself — and Maddie was eight years younger than me. I was around eight when she was born. … As Maddie grew older, she had grown this connection with horses. Loved the buggers, she did; was almost obsessed with them.”

Loona said nothing, continuing to listen with unwavering intent, enthralled with what Jim had to say in a way which showed her empathetic side — a side to Loona which didn’t come out often, except to a few select people.

Jim continued; “She was a good little sister. My brother and I took turns in taking care of her when mum and dad couldn’t. Maddie was a fussy little thing, but she didn’t know any better; just a little kid wanting to learn about the world. She always wanted me to take her to look at these stallions and mares which lived in this nearby field, and I always took her; and she always appreciated it.”

“She sounds sweet,” Loona quietly interjected, not wanting to interrupt too rudely.

Jim chuckled softly; “She really was. … I think it was when she was around nine when something went wrong. Maddie had caught a flu in the winter which got her really bad. She was vaccinated against it, so we thought it’d be over within a week. … It only got worse, though, and only within a day. Just a sleepless night and the sound of her coughing fits and wailing. On the second day, dad took her to hospital, to see if we could.. figure out what was wrong with her. … Turns out she had pneumonia.”

To hear this development formed a pit in Loona’s stomach, though she chose not to interrupt.

“I went to see her on the second day after she was admitted,” the solemn human explains; “She looked terrible, but she hadn’t given up — not our Maddie. I bought her the stuffed horse she slept with back at home, and as soon as she saw it, her face lit up. Although she was weak, she managed to scoop that stuffed horse out of my hands and squeezed it so tight. I still remember how happy she looked, despite being hooked up to these drips and an oxygen machine.”

…

“It was on the fifth day when we got the news. I had woken up at six-thirty in the morning, and I heard mum crying in the kitchen. I got out to see what was wrong. … Turns out Maddie had passed

away overnight. … She wasn't alone though; dad was with her. … I-I didn't even say goodbye, Loona. We didn't think she'd actually die.."

Loona observed as a solitary tear trickled down the side of the young man's cheek, causing the hellhound to feel at a loss for words.

She rubs the side of her arm, her eyes shifting before taking the opportunity to speak; "Fuck, that's… That's really rough. I'm sorry to hear. Is that why you wanted to hold the plush again?"

The young man nodded sombrely, wiping the side of his whilst cradling the plush in one hand. He looks up towards Loona with misty eyes as he broke a smile despite his obvious painful grief; "Sorry for blubbering on, Loona, I—"

Loona puts up her hand abruptly to interrupt Jim's thought process; "Hey listen; no apologies. There's nothing to be sorry for. It's fine, cry as much as you like; I'm not gonna shit on you for it. Grief's a hard thing to overcome."

"Oh, it's a bastard, lemme tell ya," Jim stammers with a broken chuckle; "Thanks for listenin', though."

A soft smile appears across Loona's muzzle; "Don't mention it. … There's a small bar at the front of this motel, pretty sure they sell booze. I'll get you a drink."

"Now that sounds like you're pitying me," Jim smirks weakly, wiping the remaining tears from his eyes with the tip of his right thumb.

"So what if I am?" Loona remarks with a shrug, trying to raise her roommate's spirits; "Come on, don't tell me you're going to turn down a bottle of hooch."

"Never said I would," Jim began to weakly grin, Loona's efforts to improve the mood seeming to finally pay off; "As long as you buy one with me. Gotta have someone to drink with, hey?"

This suggestion wasn't lost on Loona who considered it; "I mean, I'd love one. Thing is I already had something earlier today; don't wanna mix drinks and I end up barfing."

"Doesn't have to be a bottle of piss," Jim suggested; "You could always go for ginger beer."

Loona raised her brow towards the suggestion, giving it serious thought; "Huh. … I'll think about when we get there. … So how are you feeling, any better or what?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. That was just a moment, nothing more," Jim reassured while carefully handing the horse plush back to Loona.

The owner of the plush carefully slid the stuffed piece of memorabilia back into her backpack as she spoke gently; "That's fair. Felt like going yet, or you wanna chill out here?"

The human shrugs lightly, at a loss for a final decision; "What do you feel like doing?"

"Whatever you want to do. It's your choice," Loona insists in a rare gesture of courtesy.

A warm and appreciative smile appeared on Jim's face, his gratitude for Loona's rare display of courtesy obvious, regardless of his silence. He began to think about the choices he was given, trying to make a decision as soon as he could. That was until a sound faintly emanating from outside interrupted his thought process, causing him to turn his head in the direction of the front door.

Loona replicated this action, her eyes shifting between the front door and the human sitting before her; "What's up?"

"Do ya hear that?"

Loona grew mildly confused; "Hear what?"

"… I dunno, it sounds like chanting to me."

“Chanting??”

Suddenly Loona’s ears twitch, at last picking up the noise which Jim was talking about. The hellhound listens intently, trying to decipher exactly what the noise was, but sure enough she manages to interpret it. Jim was right; it certainly did sound like chanting, though not of the disturbing, monotone type associated with the chants of a cult. If anything, it sounded like… folk music. While listening in, Loona methodically approaches the curtain-draped window viewing outside, deciding to locate the source.

While trying to be inconspicuous with her investigation, Loona peers through the curtains and into the spacious public garden just outside, the bright hue of the late-afternoon sun obscuring her vision slightly, causing her to squint. Positioned aside to a towering oak tree was a small brick gazebo, the structure looking to have just been renovated, judging by the immaculately pristine condition of its light gray corrugated iron roof. Sitting within the structure was a small group of people; four individuals in total. From what Loona could tell, they were sitting around the interior circumference of the gazebo, making themselves quite at home on the benches provided.

It seemed obvious to Loona that she had found the culprits.

“What is it?” Jim asked with mild curiosity, he himself since gotten up to take a peek for himself.

“It’s nothing, just some people.” Loona replies, continuing to examine the gazebo’s occupants, holding her right hand above her eyes as a shield against the sunset.

Though it was muffled, the hellhound could still hear the song that these individuals were harmonizing. It sounded slow and melancholic, the sheer feeling contained within the lyrics and the way they held their voice replicating the overall feel of the unfamiliar song. That’s when Loona realized that whatever chant this was, was sung in a language she couldn’t understand.

Although Loona was more than certain that she had never heard this language or this particular chant before, there was a foreign and eerie familiarity to it; as if she had heard it somewhere in a distant, unfamiliar memory.

“They’re starting to freak me out…” Loona mumbles with a slight hint of nervousness to her voice, finding it hard to shake the feeling of familiarity which she knew for certain was false.

Jim pipes up from behind Loona, giving her a mild shock due to her sudden break of intense concentration; “I think I recognise the language.”

Loona glances behind her, towards the human off to her right; “What is it?”

“It… it sounds Russian. It’s got that tone to it that Cyrillic has,” Jim points out, guessing from the top of his head.

Loona nods cautiously, turning back towards the window and listening in silence, hearing the chant continue. That’s when the feeling of foreign familiarity evolved into minor annoyance, wanting the unexplainable feeling of familiarity to leave.

After a few more seconds, Loona made her intentions known; “I’m going out there, gonna tell them to stop.”

“Why??”

The hellhound took a few steps back from the window, giving herself some space within the rough center of the room; “They’re freaking me out, that’s why.”

Without much warning, Loona is engulfed in an intense blue light for a brief moment, emerging from it a second later in her human disguise. She straightens her crop top before letting out a huff, proceeding to head towards the front door, opening it before walking outside; directly towards the gazebo. At first, Loona wasn’t exactly sure what she was going to say to this group of four she was approaching at a marching rate, though trying her best to avoid becoming too blunt with them. A part of her wanted to turn back around and return to her room, yet this option became non-applicable as she got ever closer.

After letting out a sharp exhale, Loona called out; “Hey! Hey, excuse me!”

Loona’s bellowing voice managed to catch the surprise of all four members of the group, their collective attention now fully paid to the eccentric-looking woman now approaching them at an alarming rate.

With a brisk march in her step which slowed when she arrived at the entrance of the gazebo, Loona made her demand; “Could you all quit it with that singing?? I-It’s really starting to bother me.”

A member of the group of four – a middle-aged man with a gruff European accent – replied to Loona’s intrusion; “And why should we? It really shouldn’t be disturbing you.”

Loona furrowed her brow in increasing frustration; “But it is! It’s creeping me out! Just stop it, okay?”

The middle-aged gruff-voiced man seemed genuinely perplexed, if not taken aback; “Creepy? There’s nothing creepy to the songs we sing, woman – It’s folk music.”

Tensions only heightened when Loona gnashed her teeth slightly; “Don’t call me ‘woman’, I’ve got a name!”

“I couldn’t care less if you have a name or who you are. You have disturbed my family when we are just here to relax.” It appeared as if the middle-aged man was trying to reason with Loona, though with a stern tone to his voice; “Why are you so disturbed by us?”

Loona groaned; “Oh my fucking– I’m not disturbed by you! Just whatever the hell you’re singing! I-It’s got a… feeling to it, you know?”

The middle-aged stranger raised his eyebrows, coming to a conclusion to Loona’s troubles; “Ahhh… So you are moved by the song, yah?”

“No! Not moved!” Loona protested; “Just disturbed. I’m slightly stressed out over it.”

Interjecting into the conversation was a woman to the middle-aged man’s right – most likely his wife – who spoke in a rough yet understanding voice; “You seem very tense. W-Would you like to sit down with us? We have an extra spot in here for you.”

In spite of this genuine surprising offer, Loona raised her hands to decline; “I’m good. Thanks, but no thanks.”

“Nonsense!” The middle-aged woman refuted in her thick accent, insisting on the invite; “Do sit with us! You look like an alcohol kind of person. Would you like the ale we’ve got here?”

Loona couldn’t tell whether this stranger was stereotyping off her outward appearance or was genuinely being nice. Nonetheless, the offer of free alcohol did cause her to genuinely consider the offer. That’s when she remembered the risk of throwing up due to a mix of different alcoholic substances in her system.

“I… uhh, I mean…” Loona stuttered, feeling somewhat awkward.

“Loona!”

Jim’s shrill voice called out from behind her, causing her to jump and spin around, finding the human coming to join her.

“What’s up with ya, Loona??”

“Are you her friend, sir?” The thick-accented man interrupted, addressing the second newcomer directly.

“Yeah I am,” Jim confirmed; “Look mate, I’m sorry for Loona. We’re both under a lotta stress at the moment and we’ve been trying to relax.”

Loona furrowed her brow towards Jim as she whispered; “What do you mean you’re sorry about me? Why are you ‘sorry’?”

“Don’t you think you’re being a little uptight about them singing?”

This suggestion was a cause for bewilderment for Loona, who scoffed; “Wh– Uptight??”

“You both do appear very tense,” the middle-aged woman interrupted; “Do sit with us, the both of you! Maybe we’ll come to an understanding?”

Jim gave the offer a serious thought; “Suppose we could join you. We’re not sticking our nose in anything though, are we?”

The middle-aged gentleman chuckled; “No no, nothing much! Company is appreciated!”

Loona’s naturally introverted instincts kicked in, turning her head towards the human beside her; “Jim, listen; we really can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because I’ve already made a scene. It feels like I’m intruding if we join now,” Loona explained, feeling a hint of guilt for her outburst due to the strangers’ generosity; “Let’s just go back to the room and chill there.”

The young bushman attempted to convince Loona otherwise; “Yeah, but what would you rather do though? Sit in that stuffy, claustrophobic room, or sit out here? It’s just about nightfall anyway, the stars will be out. C’mon, Loona; it’ll be nice.”

While giving the options she had serious thought, Loona exhaled sharply, blinking a few times before nodding; “Nnngh… Ugh, fine. I guess we’re joining you.”

The apparent patriarch in this family let off an inviting half grin as he spoke in his native language, directing the second male in the group — who Loona found out was named “Pavel” — to make room for their newest guests. Loona sat down awkwardly in a newly provided spot on the bench, trying her best to avoid appearing as if she didn’t want to be there. To make herself feel more comfortable, Loona chose to sit next to Jim, this decision serving to put her mind at ease even just a little. Luckily for the nervous disguised hellhound, it appeared as if Jim had made the decision to carry further conversation on her behalf.

“So how’s life treating you, matey?” Jim jovially inquires, leaning forward in his seat.

“It continues, has its ups and downs. I enjoy it regardless,” the apparent patriarch of the group replies with a chesty cough; “Ahem— You can call me Sergei, by the way! This is my wife Svetlana, that man here is my brother; Pavel, and beside him is his daughter; Mila.”

“I’m Jim, this here’s Loona,” the young bushman charismatically introduces himself, as well as Loona on her behalf.

Loona raises her hand sheepishly with an awkward smile upon being introduced. The disguised hellhound sits quietly, allowing Jim to forward the conversation.

“I take it you’re all travellin’?”

“You’d guess correctly, sir,” Sergei confirms; “We’re going north.”

“How far north?”

“Queensland, up that way.”

“Uff, bugger!” Jim exclaimed; “Suppose you all have a long way to go!”

Sergei nodded with a grin; “Oh, we’re aware. That’s why we’ve parked here for the evening.”

“Ah, fair nuff. Whatcha headin’ up that way for?”

Sergei’s wife, Svetlana, decided to answer for her husband who was taking a swig of a bottle; “My brother lives up there, in Toowoomba. Are you familiar with the name?”

“Yeah, absolutely! I live up that way, about a thirty-minute’s drive south,” Jim went on to proudly explain.

Svetlana nodded her head in understanding; “I see! What brings you down here then?”

Jim shrugs as he gestures towards Loona to his right; “Ah, well; I’m just hanging out with my friend Loona over here. Staying here for a day then we’ll be off tomorrow if everything goes smoothly.”

Loona huffs, muttering to herself; “Let’s hope so…” she mumbles, before then finding the motivation to speak up; “Hey, just a question.”

The matriarch of the group turns her attention towards Loona, anticipating for the question to be delivered.

A moment of hesitancy overcame the disguised hellhound before she finally asks; “What exactly was that song you were singing?”

It seemed that the right question had been asked as Svetlana went on to gladly explain; “It’s an old folk song from miles away. Pretty sure it started as a poem, called “Alone I set out on the road”. I don’t think you’d be too familiar with it if I told you any more about it.”

“But that’s the weird thing,” Loona explained; “No, I haven’t heard it ever before, but it sounds… familiar for whatever reason; that’s what freaked me out about it.”

“Maybe you have a connection to folk music?”

To Loona’s surprise, “Pavel” spoke up for the first time since her encounter with this group of individuals, turning her head towards the man sitting beside his daughter.

The disguised hellhound’s eyes shifted, giving the notion serious consideration; “Maybe I do? I dunno, it’s weird.”

Pavel shrugged with indifference; “Hm. There are some things you experience which are ‘weird’, indeed.”

“Haven’t got a clue what that means, but okay.” Loona commented as she looked down at her phone resting in her hands.

Upon turning her phone on, the disguised hellhound immediately discovered the notifications from her sinstagram, showing that her earlier post had been interacted with by other users; most notably “Hellboy69”, “Hotdog”, “Esme”, and “Vortex”. Loona took a moment to herself to appreciate the feedback on her selfie, reading through the surprisingly nice comments people had to say about her apparent talent in applying makeup. If anything, she began to silently revel in the attention she was receiving, managing to put an appreciative and genuine smile across her face.

That’s when Loona noticed a direct message from none other than “Esme”:

“Damn L, ur absolutely radiant!!”

This comment wasn’t lost on Loona, who chuckled and sent a quick reply back:

“Thanks, Es. :)”

Before she could put the phone down, her phone pinged again, signaling another message.

“Esme: Where are you??”

Loona swiftly wrote a message before hitting send, the reply being sent almost instantly.

“Midnight_Howling_666: Human world, staying for the night.”

…, …

“Esme: Sweet! Can you post a pic of the stars 4 us?”

… , …

“Midnight_Howling_666: Sure. It’s not dark just yet, will be soon tho.”

… , …

“Esme: Can’t wait!!”

Snapping Loona out of her momentary concentration was the sound of a fire softly crackling. She looks up to find that the firepit in the center of the gazebo had been filled with a neat stack of firewood, with Svetlana having since lit the fire with a torch lighter she had on hand. The warm, orange glow provided a comforting heat in contrast to the frosty air around them, as well as providing an adequate source of light as the remnants of the sunset vanished to the west, allowing for the first stars of the night to begin appearing in the murky late evening sky. Loona’s eyes gravitate towards the sluggishly burning fire which crackled gently, the sight of the slow dancing flames putting her in a near hypnotic state, finding a soothing fascination in the sight.

“Loona? … Oi Loona? … Loona!”

“… Oh sh—!! Uh-umm, y-yeah what??” Loona is startled out of her deep fascination, snapping back to reality by Jim’s voice.

Jim let off a chuckle as he shook his head; “That Mila girl asked you a question.”

The disguised hellhound turns her head towards the late teenager, making eye contact; “Sorry, I wasn’t listening. Can you repeat that for me??”

“Where’d you get that phone case?” The inquirer repeats, politely gesturing towards the phone resting in Loona’s hands.

Loona glances down towards her phone, holding it up to show off the print; “Uh.. Just a store I found.”

Mila persists; “Which one, though? I want something like it; need to replace this cheap piece-of-shit case I have now.”

“Mila, language!” Her father lightly scolds, genuinely surprised by her choice of words.

This reaction from Mila’s father managed to conjure up a grinning snicker from Loona, who promptly answered; “To tell you the truth, I don’t even remember the name of the store. You wouldn’t know it even if I told you, trust me.”

After giving her answer, the disguised hellhound got up and gave herself a stretch.

“I’ll be back, just gonna take a picture,” Loona informs Jim beside her, before walking out onto the grass where the late evening sky was most visible.

By this time, the late evening had almost completely turned into night, only a barely visible slither of sunset visible in the westward direction. Above Loona was a mesmerizing display of stars glistening with a delicate shimmer above her, dotting the sky with a natural awe-inspiring masterpiece. The lone star gazer almost instantly fell in love with the display above her, somewhat glad that she had made the decision — albeit with Jim’s influence — to come out and appreciate the nature around her.

That’s when she came to a sudden realization; she felt at peace. If anything, that was the whole point in this getaway she decided upon; to have peace of mind, away from the monotonous drama from home. With this inner peace having since been realized, Loona turns her phone back on to take that night sky selfie she promised, positioning the camera to look directly at her before adjusting herself in a nonchalant pose, all complete with a smile.

click!

Just as Loona takes the picture, a noise is heard coming from the direction of the gazebo. She looks back towards the outdoor structure, finding out that one member of the family, that being Mila, had begun playing a guitar which she had on hand, gently strumming a tune. Loona listens in for a

moment, before then hearing Sergei's voice providing soothing vocals in that same "Cyrillic" language, completing the song which was just beginning. The tune in question sounded calm and relaxing, and unlike the folk song from earlier on, didn't put Loona's mind on edge at all — she still was yet to figure out why she had that reaction.

With a peaceful sigh and a relaxed smile on her face, Loona made her way back to gazebo to join the group, ready to rest by the low-simmering fire.

Chapter End Notes

The song described at the end: https://youtu.be/HjmmxX5U2VM

A Price Duly Paid

Loona awoke within the blissful comfort of her motel room bed, her eyes slowly opening with a fatigued flutter as she once more regained consciousness, emerging from what the hellhound considered to be a perfect night's sleep. The silky white sheets of the pristinely kept bed kept Loona firmly tucked in almost like a cocoon; her fur pressing against them in a snug, comforting fashion. If anything, she began to detest having to get out of bed, wanting to continue slumbering in the pearly-white covers which soothed Loona like a hug. It was almost as if the bed was embracing her, begging for her to laze around for a few more minutes; to appreciate it that bit longer.

This sentiment surrounding this particular bed was to be expected from Loona; afterall, she wasn't an early riser in the mornings to begin with, almost always resorting to lie stagnant within the confines of her own bed, daring not to move. Sometimes Loona wished she could lie in bed for as long as she desired without the threat of everyday responsibilities getting in the way; today was one of those lazier mornings, the temptation to go back to sleep almost irresistible, especially with the blankets — in addition to her own fur — protecting her from the near punishing chill. Ultimately, Loona decided to return to a resemblance of sleep, nestling herself deeper into the covers and closing her scarlet-red eyes, promising to herself that she would only take an extra five minutes worth of rest.

Just as she made herself comfortable once more, Loona felt an object nestled under her right arm. She opens her eyes once more with a few drowsy blinks, becoming curious as to what this foreign unknown object may be. From what she could tell, it felt soft and pillowy to the touch; a feeling which she was most familiar with. Loona glanced down towards her right arm as she peeled off the covers, unveiling the currently unknown object. The hellhound didn't know exactly what she was expecting to find; regardless of her expectations, when she found the object tucked up into her arm, she couldn't help but feel mildly surprised yet embarrassed.

It was "Thorn"; the very same stuffed horse plush Loona swore she had returned to the confines of her backpack.

A blush of embarrassment glowed faintly through Loona's fur as she whispered to herself; "H-Huh?? How in the…"

The appearance of the horse plush jogged Loona's mind, making her temporarily disoriented, her eyes squinting in confusion. How did the plush end up in her arms? Did she subconsciously grab it? Was she cuddling it the whole night without thinking? … Did someone put it there??

Upon pondering this last question, Loona turns her attention to her right, peering towards the adjacent bed where Jim slept, only to discover that the bed was empty. The sound of the bathroom door creaking open diverted Loona's attention to her left as she sat upright, finding Jim walking out of the second room while drying his hands.

Loona narrowed her eyes into a suspicious look as she tracked Jim's position, waiting for the human to notice her glaring directly at him. It took a couple of seconds, though eventually he froze, turning his attention towards the hellhound sitting upright upon her respective bed. Jim makes direct eye contact with a suspicious Loona, staring at her in brief confusion before finally breaking the silence.

"What?"

Loona holds up her stuffed horse plush in one hand, pointing towards it while maintaining her accusing look; "You tucked this in with me, didn't you?"

Jim hesitated for a second before shrugging, trying to play it off with a slightly cheeky grin; "What do ya mean?"

The hellhound rolls her eyes; "You know what I mean. I remember going to bed last night without Thorn. I woke up, and I found him under my right arm. How did he end up with me?"

"Err… Fuck if I know," Jim smirked; "Suppose he just jumped out of your bag and came to sleep with ya."

Loona unsurprisingly wasn't convinced, huffing before speaking once more; "… You tucked him in with me, I know you did. I'll ask again; why?"

"… Okay yes, I did," Jim finally admits to his 'crime', a joking grin maintained on his face; "You're not gonna kill me if I told you why, yeah?"

Loona scoffs with a smirk; "Come on, as if I would! What am I, some kind of wild animal?? … Don't answer that."

“Yeah nah, I don't think I will,” Jim remarked in a teasing manner before explaining himself; “… You were fussing in your sleep last night.”

Upon hearing this, Loona was genuinely taken aback; “Fussing?”

“Yeah! Like a… well, like a puppy, yanno?” Jim reveals, quietening his voice towards the end of the sentence so as not to sound rude about his comparison.

“Like a… No way, I-I call bullshit! You’re messing with me!” Loona stutters almost defensively, becoming mildly shocked by the revelation, which in turn causes her to begin feeling self-conscious.

Jim snickers as he shook his head; “I’m not, I promise ya! I woke up at around midnight ‘cause I heard you fussing and whining a little. You were making these sad little dog noises and I felt sorry for ya. Did you have a night terror or something like that??”

The hellhound furrowed her brow in confusion; “Not that I can remember, no! W-Was I kicking a little?”

“Somewhat?” Jim confirms; “But mostly it looked like you were wanting to hold onto something, the way you were fidgeting in your sleep. So, you know, I reached into that bag here and I got the stuffed horse for ya. Sorta just slid him in between ya hands, and you grabbed onto him. That’s when you finally calmed down, started hugging him and all that… pretty sure your tail started wagging, too.”

A feeling of near crippling embarrassment overcame Loona as she groaned painfully to herself, hiding her face away with her hands; “Ugh, shiiiiiit… Can’t believe I still do that! No way…”

Jim became curious about the context of whatever “that” was; “Do what?”

Loona let out a defeated sigh, looking up from her hands while running her fingers through her hair. She began explaining; “There’s this thing I sometimes do in my sleep which I’ve always found really embarrassing. Not sure what it’s called, but on rare occasions I… Ugh— I fuss around while I’m asleep if I don’t have something to hold. Sometimes I squirm or kick around, maybe even start yelping a little. Like, think of sleepwalking, but without the “walking” part.”

The human nods slowly, taking the information dump all in; “So that includes whimpering and all that, hey?”

Loona nods reluctantly out of embarrassment; “Yep. Whimpering, as well as kicking, fidgety hands, and so on. Only a handful of people have seen me do it, including you and dad. That’s.. ugh — look, that’s partially the reason why dad got me Thorn in the first place.”

“Ah yeah?”

“Mhm,” the hellhound admits with a hum, gradually becoming more comfortable with talking about her eccentric sleep patterns; “I think it was maybe the second day after dad adopted me when he found out about it. He woke me up in the middle of the night, barging into my room to see if I was okay; said he heard me whimpering and he thought I was in trouble. Needless to say, I gave him absolute wrath for invading my room like that. I said I was “fine” and he needed to go back to sleep, not to worry about the bullshit I do.”

Just as she says this, Loona looks down towards the plush in her hands, causing her to smile with endearment; “So the next day comes around, and dad finds me in the kitchen after going out shopping. He’s got this big, dumb smile on his face with one hand in his coat, and I go “What”. Dad says that he “bought me a present”, and he pulls out this exact same plush and shows it off with this dumb twinkle in his eye. I think I said to him that I “didn’t want it” but I took it anyway, put it in my room next to my bed, and immediately named it “Thorn”. Sometimes I sleep with it in my arms, sometimes I don’t, but I cherish it nonetheless. Keeps my night fussing at bay, too, so there’s that.”

Upon looking back up towards her accompanying roommate, Loona immediately took notice of the tight grin he wore on his face; as if he was entertained by her confession.

As soon as she notices this, Loona asks; “The hell’s that look for?”

Jim’s grinning turned into a snicker, shaking his head in tandem; “Nothin’, it’s just cute.”

“Pffft! It really isn’t. You’re speaking out your ass,” Loona immediately remarks as she got up from her bed, “Thorn” nestled under her arm in an almost maternal fashion.

The young man rolls his eyes; “Come off it, yes it is. You’re doing it right now!”

“Doing what?” Loona genuinely asks, somewhat confused.

“The way you’re holding the plush, like it’s your kid — I find that heartwarming.”

“I’m not exactly going to throw him around, now am I? He’s already got that tear on his neck as is,” the hellhound proceeds to justify herself, still adamant against the idea of anything related to herself being “cute”.

“See what I mean?”

“Uh.. no?”

“The way you’re talking about it, Loona. Your softer side’s coming out. As I said a month or so ago; you’re not as big and mean as all that.”

“Mhm. Whatever you say,” Loona replies indifferently, trying her best to deny this truth to herself. Only serving to unintentionally prove Jim’s conviction correct was the question the hellhound asks shortly after; “How are those wounds going?”

Loona’s roommate sat down on the corner of his bed as he replied; “Just had a look at them in the bathroom. They’re going alright, don’t hurt anymore. Ya did a good job with how you’ve dressed them for me.”

“I don’t remember asking for a critique, but thank you,” Loona responds as she paced slowly around the room, rubbing the back of her head. That’s when she groans, realizing something; “Ohhh fuck, we’re gonna have to go back home today…”

A sharp, hesitant sigh left Jim’s mouth as he asked; “Back to hell?”

The hellhound nods reluctantly, rubbing her forehead with one hand; “Yep… Can I be honest with you? It probably sounds weird for me to say this, but I really don’t wanna go back.”

To hear this sentiment took Jim by mild surprise, prompting him to speak; “Yeah? Why’s that?”

“I dunno, it’s just… I like it here, you know?” Loona went on to explain in all seriousness; “There’s this genuine peace to the human world which I can’t really explain. It’s calm here, I can think straight, I’m not always on edge; it’s all so… nice. There’s a word which kinda explains how I feel about the human world; ‘escapism’, or something like that.”

“Uhh… I reckon ‘Respite’ is a better word,” Jim proposes another word, contributing to the subject matter.

“Respite” — a period of rest or relief away from something difficult; a word which certainly wasn’t lost on Loona, who gave it serious consideration upon hearing it. It described her situation so well. The human world, in this instance, was a sanctuary; an entire realm away from the difficulties of hell, as well as a place of refuge away from the current threat of that dreadful sinner currently pursuing herself and her human friend. In addition, the human world was almost like Loona’s current special ‘quiet place’; a getaway when the goings got too tough for her to bare all at one time.

Loona blinks a few times before slowly nodding her head; “Respite? Hm… That sounds about right.”

“Can I state something I’ve noticed?” Jim asks in a casual yet serious manner.

“Go on, shoot.” Loona replies, granting the human permission to speak as she casually leans up against the wall, crossing her arms comfortably.

“I’ve noticed you act differently up here – You’re less tense. As you said; you’re not on edge as often and you can think right. That’s what I’ve noticed anyhow. You’re also less “tight-lipped” about things, I suppose more open in a way.”

Loona butts in politely, wanting to elaborate on her less tight-lipped behavior; “That’s because you’re easy to talk to. I can’t do that with many other people, besides a few other friends that I

know and, to a point, dad. Say, if you were Moxxie and you found about… I dunno, “Thorn”, I would’ve beaten your little red ass to a pulp.”

Jim nods; “Heh. Right… Which one of those red shortarses is Moxxie again?”

“The one with the white hair and the nasally voice.”

“Oh him… Christ, he does me head in…”

A wide smirk spread across Loona’s maw, finding Jim’s complaint hilarious; “You too, huh?”

“Oh matey, you don’t understand,” the young bushman exclaims with a half chuckle; “He hasn’t spoken to me a whole lot, but any time he has, it's either a questionnaire or a fucken interrogation. It’s like he’s compelled to be uptight, yanno? Like for Christ sakes, ya short bastard, get out of my hair!”

Loona almost immediately erupted into a hearty burst of laughter, guffawing with ferocious volume! She shook her head weakly, wiping a tear from her eye before remarking with a wide sharp-toothed grin; “HAH!! H-Holy shit, that’s hilarious! That’s almost exactly how I feel!”

Jim looks towards Loona, a half-smirk forming on his lips; “Yeah? Why’s that?”

This question prompts Loona to scoff; “He’s just a little moaning know-it-all. He’s got this sense of superiority to him all because… actually, I don’t even know why he does. He’s nearly always bitching about the job I’m doing or how I’m doing it, especially when I’m out on a mission with them! Whenever I tag along on a job, there’s Moxxie complaining by the end that I’m either being “too careful” or “too dangerous”, blah blah blah… You can’t win with him!”

“He sounds pretentious,” Jim comments as an observation.

Loona nods emphatically, wholeheartedly agreeing; “Oh, he definitely is.”

The hellhound observes as her roommate heaved himself off the bed, resting his hands on his hips and giving off a guttural exhale while looking towards the floor.

After a few seconds, he looks back up towards Loona before asking; “Can I ask ya something else?”

Loona shrugs; “I don’t see why not.”

“… Do you enjoy doing that?”

“Doing… what?” Loona asks, somewhat confused as to the context of the question.

Her question wasn’t yet answered, remaining perplexed as Jim scratched the top of his head; “You know, the uhh… that whole “thing” ya old man’s got going on.”

The hellhound raises her brow, starting to catch on to what her companion was saying; “You mean I.M.P?”

Jim gave a brief nod, confirming Loona’s assumption; “Yeah, like, is it something you.. I dunno, enjoy?”

“Are you asking if I like killing? Is that it?” The hellhound further pushes, attempting to understand the young man’s question through the means of guessing.

“… Y-Yeah,” Jim hesitantly confirms with a slight nod; “Is that something you like doing is what I’m asking.”

Loona furrows her brow in an almost baffled expression, practically scoffing at the suggestion; “What?? Fuck no! Of course I don’t. To be frank, I’d rather be doing something else entirely. Me doing that? It’s just a way to make ends meet through the means of exploiting vengeful dumbasses with grudges.”

This response provokes a follow-up question; “What would you rather be doing? For a job, I mean.”

“... Shit, uhh… I-I haven’t even thought about that, to be honest,” Loona admits hesitantly, furrowing her brow as she thought of the options available to her.

Jim raises his brow slightly in mild surprise, before remarking; “You’d make a good security guard, I reckon.”

“A security guard?? Heh. No, I think that’s too much responsib–”

Catching Loona completely off-guard was the sudden blaring from her phone vibrating on the bedside table, the custom ringtone which she had installed intruding abruptly into the conversation which was slowly but surely evolving into small-talk.

Without any hesitation, Loona approaches the bedside table and grabs her phone, checking to see who it was. Lo and behold, it was another familiar face; one which she had merely named “Hellboy” on her contacts list. The hellhound became perplexed, wondering as to why this fellow hellhound had decided to call, considering the fact that he usually didn’t. Regardless of this factor, Loona promptly answers the phone before holding it to her ear.

“Sorry Jim, gotta take this one,” Loona apologizes before turning her attention back to her phone. She answers the incoming pending call, initiating the conversation with a relaxed approach; “Hey hey, big guy! What’s going on, dude?”

“Hey Loona, good to speak to you again,” “Hellboy” replies, his gruff and deep voice sounding off through the receiver – there was a hint of seriousness to the way he carried his tone; *“Listen, I just wanna ask you something.”*

The female hellhound huffs; “Pffft! I’ve been asked questions all day so far. Sure, hit me.”

“Have you seen Morger around?”

Loona furrows her brow a little as she paces around the room, towards the direction to the bathroom for some privacy; “Morger? N-No, I haven't seen him for two days. I’ve been up in the human world. Why?”

“Hellboy” grunts in a worried manner on the other end of the line; *“‘Cause we haven’t seen him for two days, was wondering if you knew where he’d be. We called his work too; they said that he hasn’t turned up. Say, where did you last see him?”*

“I-I gave him a ride back home two nights ago,” Loona explained, growing slightly concerned herself; “I literally saw him walk right back into the apartment building; I watched him.”

“Right… Okay, I’ll go check there,” “Hellboy” informs Loona.

“Do you need me to come back and we’ll have a look together?” Loona inquires in an offer of assistance to find the apparently missing bouncer.

“No, that’s okay; I’m with Esme. I’m a few minutes away from his place already,” “Hellboy” states; *“I’ll call you back if we have any updates.”*

“I-If you could, thanks,” Loona expresses her thanks, before saying her goodbyes and hanging up the phone; “... Well that’s concerning.”

“What is?” Jim butts in, after having tried eavesdropping into the conversation from the other side of the motel room.

Loona shakes her head in slight disbelief before replying; “Morger’s gone missing. You know, that other hellhound you met back at the office? Not Tex; the other one who helped me out with interrogating that ‘Francis Tyler’ guy.”

“Oh him? … Streuth, that doesn’t sound good.”

“It isn’t,” Loona agrees dimly, her concern for Morger’s possible whereabouts playing on her mind; “Something’s wrong, I can feel it…”

Whether or not Loona's gut feeling assessment was accurate to reality or not would be told with certainty in the fullness of time.

If only she could be proven wrong.

Blitz lay upon the couch of his apartment with his gaze fixated upwards towards the ceiling, his face devoid of any expression while his mind was completely absent of any thought. There was an atmosphere of depressive stagnation throughout the apartment as the imp dared not move, for there was seldom any motivation to do so. Having since made up his mind overnight upon the issue of that "hillbilly" and her daughter after his alcohol-induced fever dream, Blitz no longer wished to think any more thoughts for the time being, having since grown exhausted from doing so.

Time seemed to hold no place or meaning within the apartment walls for as long as Blitz remained in his uncompromising catatonic state, the feeling of which only intensified by the lack of outside noise except the occasional creak and thud of the couch's springs. Photos of his daughter and a copy of her adoption certificate hung up on the wall beyond the couch, reminding the lonesome, somber imp of who he was to Loona — or at least what he was supposed to be.

Was he ever going to get better? Would he ever see completely eye-to-eye with people around him? Most pressing of all — Would he ever be a better father? Blitz wasn't sure of the answer, perhaps even devoid of hope for himself. A part of him knew for a fact that the "fullness of time" wouldn't be kind to him; that he would eventually push everyone away, even those who stayed adamantly by his side.

Including Loona — his Loonie. His only true sense of… family.

This single, solitary thought stuck out in Blitz's mind, prompting minuscule tears to form at the corner of his eyes. He wanted to cr—

Ca-Chunk!

Creeeeeak…

“Dad, we’re home! Are you here?”

Blitz shot upright from his lying position, his pricks of tears vanishing near instantly as he looked towards the entrance door. Sure enough, Loona had arrived back home with Jim in tow closely behind, her black backpack slung over her shoulder by a singular strap.

The previously pensive imp was quick to compose himself, clearing his throat; “O-Oh, Loonie! How was the trip?”

Loona shrugs nonchalantly as she makes her way inside, sluggishly pacing towards her room; “Meh, it was fine. Was nice enough, I guess.”

Blitz gave off a false smile, perhaps overextending his attempts to play his earlier thoughts off; “D-Did you get up to anything fun?”

“… Not particularly,” Loona carefully replies, starting to suspect something up with her father’s demeanor; “... You’re acting weird, what’s going on?”

“Hah! Me? A-Acting weird?? No I ain’t, I’m fine!” Blitz charismatically reassures with that same artificial smile.

Now Loona was starting to really catch on, glaring at her father with a suspicious and knowing look; “Sure you are.”

Blitz’s artificial toothy grin faded as he turned his attention towards the human, immediately noticing the new dark brown coat and flat cap; “Woah, Jim-boy. T-The fuck’s with the look?”

“It’s none of your business,” Jim coldly replies, deliberately trying to avoid talking with the being which had caused him grief for the duration of his reluctant stay.

“Ahah, right! Gotcha!”

Blitz replies with a faked camaraderie exterior, pointing finger guns towards the human, all the while Loona watches on with caution of what may come, more than ready to intervene. The hellhound wasn't sure yet as to what Blitz's end game was this time, though deep down she knew it wouldn't end well. She didn't have to wait long as Blitz made his move; his fake smile faded to a slight frown before turning his reserved gaze towards her, before at last speaking.

"Hey, uh– sweetie?"

"What," Loona instantaneously replies, barely leaving a second to pass for her response.

"... C-Can I speak to Jim-Boy over here? Am I allowed?" Blitz requests in a submissive way.

Loona couldn't help but raise her brow, almost instantly noticing how seemingly genuine the request was.

Regardless, the hellhound maintained her suspicion; "About what? What could you possibly want to speak to him about??"

"Listen, pumpkin.. I-I just want to talk to him," Blitz tries meekly to assure; "You can butt in at any time you like if you think I go out of line, okay?"

Loona's initial suspicion was slowly turning into cautious curiosity, her guard being lowered by her father's seemingly genuine request; especially considering that he was allowing for her to butt in if she felt it was necessary – not that she wouldn't've, through the imp's permission or not.

After a few more seconds of cautious hesitation, Loona answers while squinting; "I really don't trust you, but… Fine. Go right ahead. Can he speak to you, Jim?"

Jim rigidly nods; "... Sure," he reluctantly replies, turning his gaze towards the reserved-looking imp; "What do ya want?"

Blitz let out a guttural sigh before letting it out; "... Alright, please just hear me out on this one, both of you – not that I deserve to be heard out."

…

"I-I'm s–sor… fucking dammit– I'm sorry."

An apology?

Loona was genuinely surprised; never in recent memory had ever apologized to anyone, let alone in such a genuine way. She listened in from the sideline, continuing to examine the situation carefully, watching for any telltale signs of a flare of tensions.

Blitz continues; "I-I know there's no chance you'll forgive me for the grief I've given you, Jim-boy — not that I want your forgiveness — but… I just want you to know that I'm sorry for getting in the way and being a nuisance – a pest."

The apparently sorrowful imp then addresses his daughter, gesturing towards her; "I've hurt you too, Loonie; I'm fully aware. That promise I made a couple of days ago, about staying out of your business? I've broken it; completely shattered. … I'm sorry for that, too."

"... You're serious, right? This isn't a joke??" Loona asks, though her question wasn't said in a disparaging way, but rather phrased in a way which conveyed genuine curiosity.

Blitz shook his head; "No! No. … No it's not, I promise! I really wanna help out, too."

"How the hell can you help out? What do ya mean by that?" Jim butts in, his voice blunt and callous, obviously suspicious of the imp's true intentions – perhaps understandably so.

"It's exactly what it sounds like! There isn't some deeper hidden meaning," Blitz attempts to assure, addressing both Loona and Jim; "I'll do anything you need me to. If it means coming out of this shitheap and getting on with our lives? Then I'll cooperate fully. If I fuck up again, you're both more than welcome to completely disregard me."

Loona grew ever curious; “Anything?”

The imp nodded with all seriousness with nothing but authenticity surrounding his word in his eyes; “Anything.”

Loona didn’t know exactly what to think of Blitz’s promise. On one hand, the imp had done everything within his power for the past five days to act like a complete nuisance towards Jim for reasons completely unknown to herself. On the other hand, there was a certain look of genuine feeling within his eyes which never faltered throughout the duration of his apology; the way he handled his tone also replicated that deep seriousness and genuine guilt which was rarer still.

Not once did Loona take her eyes off Blitz as she decided whether or not to take his word as fact. She breaks the silence by delivering her verdict, cautiously nodding her head and grunting; “Hmph. Alright. … Then listen up, I need you to do something for me. If you fuck this up, then all trust is lost. Got it?”

Blitz nods emphatically in utter compliance, determined not to disappoint any further than he already had.

Without further ado, Loona begins explaining her plan; “Good. I’m going to pay someone a visit later tonight; he’s a lead who is connected with Malloy, supposed to be his ex-“right-hand man” or something dumb like that. While I’m gone, I need you to watch over Jim for me.”

“Oh Christ, Loona, please no…” Jim groans in pained protest, already heavily reluctant towards the idea.

“What other choice do we have, Jim? You can’t come with me,” Loona points out, though completely understanding his steadfast reluctance; “You’ll just have to tolerate each other for a few hours.”

“Ough, give me strength— I’ll just have to, don’t I?” The human capitulates, at last coming to terms with the lack of options available; “Sure. But if he starts anything, I’m belting him.”

“Just try me, you yankee-doodle-looking motherfucker…” Blitz mumbles quietly to himself.

Loona rolls her eyes; “I don’t give a shit what you two do! Just at the very least refrain from killing each other until I get back. Can you two do that for me, or is that too much to ask?”

An exchange of near uncompromising serious glances was exchanged between Jim and Blitz, not one of them daring to speak a word; afterall, their task was completely understood mutually. In near unison, they stiffly nodded to each other in agreement to the peace terms, before then turning their collective attention back towards Loona, nodding rigidly towards the hellhound in a sure signal that they would comply with her wishes.

Loona stares intently at the pair standing before her, at last becoming convinced that they would take her instruction seriously. If anything, she was more concerned with whether or not Blitz would stick to his usually unreliable word. Would the imp at least try to make genuine headway towards peace? Loona knew that only time would tell.

The hellhound runs her hand down her face and let out an abrupt sigh, feeling the need to repeat her wishes, though at the same time feeling that progress was finally being made to make amends.

Once more, Loona speaks, this time with a sense of authority; “Okay, cool. Just to be absolutely clear — especially with you, dad — I don’t wanna hear anymore arguing from either of you. We’ve had enough of that horseshit for the past five days! If I hear any more arguing, name calling, or any of that petty and childish crap from here on out, I’m going to beat you both senseless — I am not fucking joking, either.”

“Understood,” Jim states his compliance obediently with another nod.

Blitz, meanwhile, didn’t react. Despite this lack of reaction and her deeply-rooted suspicions, Loona decided to hand the unusually compliant imp the benefit of the doubt, somewhat believing that he would comply with her order – at least for the time being.

With compliance checks now over and done with, Loona mumbles to herself in exhaustion as she enters her room for some privacy. Just before she closes the door completely, she turns around and glares once more towards the pair.

“I’ll be in here for a while. No. Bullshit.” Loona warns sternly with a jabbing finger, accompanied by a look which could kill. She especially focuses on Blitz; “I’m watching you, dad – BEHAVE.”

Loona abruptly shuts the door behind her, allowing her to enjoy the privacy of her room once more. She breathes a sharp sigh of relief, rubbing her temple lightly as she sets her backpack atop of her bed. Thus began the process of unpacking her things; the grimoire, a few unopened snacks and a bottle of premium bourbon she brought from the human world, and last but not least; “Thorn”, in all of his seamed and stuffed glory.

Loona took a moment to look at the plush as she held it gently in her hands, all the while being careful not to squeeze it too hard. The owner of the sentimental item examined it with a keen eye, checking for any new imperfections such as a tear or a scuff-mark – to her relief, she found nothing out of the ordinary.

A small smile appeared on Loona’s maw as she spoke quietly to the plush; “Heh. You poor little thing… Look at you, all worn and creased,” she quietly remarks to the horse-shaped stuffie, before giving it a soft endearing kiss on its forehead.

Luckily nobody was around to see that.

“Wanna rest with me, little guy? … Tsk. Of course you do,” Loona continued to converse affectionately with the plush, making sure to keep her tone as quiet as she could.

With the plush held gently in her grasp, the hellhound gently lays herself down gently on top of her bed, resting her head against the pillows as she lies completely flat on her back. A sense of relief swept over Loona, savoring the all too familiar inviting comfort which her bed provided to her throughout the years since she was adopted.

After staring up towards the ceiling in a bout of mental stagnation, Loona looks up towards the plush sitting upright on her stomach; her right hand supporting its back in case it happened to topple over. She examines the plush with mild endearment, finding herself gently caressing its stringy brown mane which sat messily upon its head — Loona didn’t want to admit it so openly, but she loved “Thorn” without a doubt. As she tends to the plush, the constant tranquil feeling that Loona felt while she stayed in the living world seemed to linger on as she lay motionless on the bed, the mattress and pillows supporting her back and head respectively, helping her relax in an almost therapeutic way.

That was when Loona picked up the faint sound of something happening outside; a conversation.

The hellhound couldn't help but fear the worst, preparing herself to get out of bed and confront that certain insufferable imp who was about to betray her trust yet again! Yet… yet something about the muffled conversation just outside made her pause. For the first time in five days, the conversation between Jim and Blitz didn't appear to be vitriolic and chaotic; instead this time, this instance of the pair interacting sounded more level-headed and orderly.

While maintaining her uncompromising silence, Loona listened in from the comfort of her bed, intently eavesdropping into the muffled conversation:

"Look, Jim-Boy; you shouldn't have taken all that horseshit I said to heart. I-I'm a hot-headed moron, and a proud one at that! Most of the time..."

"Why say it in the first place if you didn't mean it "like that", though? Spouting off like a loose-cannon leads to consequences — that goes for anything."

"As if I don't know that, you dumbass. … But hear me out a minute. You're a decent human; even I understand that. Just know that I already got a lot on my plate, needing to run a bizz and all that shit. You being down here only added to that workload, and I blamed you for that increased stress. I know, I know; a dick move on my part! But hey, I'm already a dick naturally."

"Gotcha… at least you're not ashamed to say it."

"Hah! Of course I'm not. … But when it affects my Loonie, it hurts me. Because of that, I try to keep it at a minimum when I can, which I'm really not good at… as you can tell."

A feeling of genuine surprise emerged within the forefront of Loona's mind; was her dad really having a civilized conversation? It was almost too good to be true. The way that he was expressing himself as well, attempting to reason with Jim in a way which he hadn't previously done so. Loona couldn't help but begin to doubt Blitz's current state because of this abnormally compliant behavior – Had something happened to him when she was gone? Did he fall on his head somewhere? Was he well? Drunk??

Wait… why was she questioning it in the first place? This is what she wanted. It was probably best to take it at face value.

"Dammit Loona, you think too much," Loona mutters quietly to herself as she felt relief that things were going to her liking – at last.

Once more, she looks back towards the beige horse plush resting on her stomach; its prominent black button eyes glaring cockeyed towards her. Loona stares back in response, her mind beginning to drift into a state of content blankness in her blissful moment's rest. It was in that frame of mind when Loona decided to close her eyes, desiring to take a nap.

…

Ping!

"...Ngh… Mmm…?"

The sound of a notification from her phone sounds off to her immediate right; in the direction of where her phone sat while charging. A temporary spell of brain fog plagues Loona as soon as she wakes up in reaction to the break in silence, blinking a couple of times while regaining consciousness. The half-asleep hellhound wipes the saliva that had built up on the corners of her mouth after finally making heads-or-tails of her surroundings, staring blankly towards the ceiling before turning her head to the right. That's where she found her nightstand, and sitting underneath the bedside lamp was her phone, still hooked up to its charger – exactly as she had left it.

Loona reaches for her phone without much delay. Her initial thoughts that the notification in question was nothing more than an alert from her Sinstagram, notifying that her post from the human world had acquired more likes; perhaps even a comment. Another part of her thought that it may just be another one of those scam text messages, announcing to the owner of the device that she had just won a million dollars in a contest which she never entered into. In spite of her initial expectations, the reality of what the notification was turned out to be far different.

As soon as Loona turns on her phone which brings up her lock-screen, she raises her eyebrow in confusion as she reads the anticipated alert:

Esme: 1 Missed Call (2 mins)

This prompts Loona to sit upright in her bed, deciding that she would answer the call. Upon selecting the message, she presses her finger against the “Call Back” button which appears underneath. Once the phone starts ringing back, she holds the device up to her ear, anticipating for Esme to answer.

It took no time at all for the fellow hellhound to pick up; “Loona? Loona, y-you there??”

“Y-Yeah, I’m here Es’,” Loona instantaneously responds, her voice still somewhat croaky and tired from her brief nap; “Sorry I couldn’t answer, I was having a nap. What’s up?”

Something which Loona took note of was the way that Esme was breathing in this call; it sounded as if she had just run a marathon, each individual inhale and exhale sounding shallow and rapid. If anything, it sounded anxious.

“W-Where are you right now??” Esme stammers through each unsteady breath.

“I’m in my room at the moment. W-Why, what’s going on?” Loona asks as a growing sense of concern starts making itself known; something was up.

With increasing concern, Loona listens as Esme swallows nervously before continuing; “Oh fuck– okay… uff– okay– uhh… We, uh… W-We found Morger, Loona. It’s… I-It’s bad. It’s really bad.”

Loona felt a pit open up in her stomach; “W-What? What does that mean? … Esme, what does that–”

“We had to take him to hospital, Loona, it’s really bad.”

“What the he– Hospital?! W-Why’s he in the hospital?!”

“We found him unconscious in his apartment; He-he’s in a really bad way! S-Some must’ve broken in and fucked him up with a baseball bat or… something!”

Loona’s eyes had widened in overwhelming shock as she heard the deeply troubling news, causing her to tremble lightly; “Holy crap… W-Where’s Morger right now, which wing??”

“We’re in intensive care, in the sloth ring,” Esme almost instantly informs; “I think you should come; it’s really not looking good…”

“Gotcha, okay! Fuck– I-I’m coming!!”

Loona instantly hangs up the call as she jumps up from her bed with unbelievable speed! Wasting no time at all, she makes a frantic beeline towards her bedroom door, swinging it open with frightening brute strength! The sound of the door swinging wide open and hitting the wall with a loud “BANG!” causes both the human and the imp outside to jump, turning their heads towards Loona as she rushes outside with a deeply anxious look on her face!

Upon seeing his daughter’s horrified face, Blitz begins to ask; “L-Loonie?? S-Sweetie, what’s wro–”

“The van keys!!” Loona orders with sheer urgency; “Where the fuck are the van keys?!”

“Huh? I-In the kitchen!” The imp answers, before once again asking; “Where are you going, what’s wrong with you??”

The obviously anxious hellhound doesn’t answer as she swiftly grabs the van keys, holding them firmly in her grasp as she sprints towards the front door!

“Loonie??”

With a violently shaking hand, Loona throws the front door wide open before running right out into the hallway, neglecting to close the door behind her as she runs frantically towards the elevator!

“LOONIE?!”

There was no reply.

Full of overwhelming confusion and concern, both Blitz and Jim listen helplessly to Loona’s echoing frantic footfalls growing quieter and quieter as she runs towards the elevators for the ground floor.

HOOOOONK!!!

“GET OUT OF MY WAY, YOU MORONS!!”

The IMP company van sped straight into the Sloth Ring General Hospital’s parking lot, swerving around the bend at dan gerous speeds as the tires screeched loudly! Never before had Loona been in such a race against time, trying to the utmost of her ability to make it in time to see the pitiful state that Morger was in. There must have been countless road infringements that the hellhound had committed by trying to reach the Sloth Ring in time, though at this point, she didn’t care — she needed to find Morger, and fast!

She needed to be there as soon as possible, in case he di— no… *no!* He wouldn’t! Loona knew he wouldn’t! She knew for a *FACT* that he would pull through this!

...Would he?

No! Fuck that! He will pull through! He has to! Morger wasn’t one for quitting, he was too strong for that!

Loona careens the van through the parking lot and right into a spare parking space, almost crashing into other parked cars which were adjacent to the spot! As soon as she parks the car and practically rips the key out of the ignition, Loona swings the door wide open with a kick of her foot and jumps

out! She kicks the van door shut with brutish strength and immediately locks the door, before then sprinting with massive strides towards the Hospital Entrance where the lobby awaited her!

As she ran with a nervous sweat beading down her brow, Loona was hoping beyond hope that she wasn't too late; she couldn't have been! She had gotten there in record time, she was positively sure of it!

WHAM!

Loona barges right through the entrance door of the hospital lobby without stopping, causing a loud reverberation to sound off throughout the room! All eyes of those who were present in the lobby were locked onto the anxious-looking hellhound who marched up to the front counter, before confronting the receptionist. The incubus receptionist looked up from his desktop towards Loona with indifference, letting out a huff as if he was inconvenienced by the hellhound's unscheduled presence.

The incubus speaks in a disinterested tone; "What can I do for you?"

"Y-Yeah, hey," Loona greets back through bated breath, running her fingers through her hair to fix it up from all her running; "Do you know where I can find the intensive care ward? I-I'm looking for a friend of mine."

The incubus slowly blinks, taking a few seconds to register the question in his head; "… Do you have a reservat—ACK!!"

Suddenly Loona grabs the incubus by his collar, pulling him towards her with force!

The hellhound growls angrily; "THE INTENSIVE CARE WARD, DICKFACE!! Where is it?!?"

"A-Ack—!! D-Down the end of the c-corridor… then turn right—!!" The incubus chokes out, his voice and breath straining from the collar pressing against his throat!

“THANK YOU!!” Loona barks, slamming the receptionist right back into his chair before striding right into the hallway, ever deeper into the hospital wing.

In spite of her rush, Loona paced herself a little so as not to inadvertently cause any more confrontations or mishaps as with the receptionist; she didn’t have the time nor the patience. Moreover, she needed to mentally stabilize herself in order to prepare for the situation she was about to confront, which she enacted upon through the means of slowing her breath through a deep inhale, followed by a slow and steady exhale. This technique seemed to help as Loona felt a sense of collectiveness fill the forefront of her mind, mentally noting to herself that she would need to take this horrible episode one step at a time.

But that begged the question; *would she be able to handle it? … She would just have to.*

At last, Loona rounds the corner to her right, passing under the sign which reads in bold letters; “Intensive Care Ward”. The hellhound let out a steady exhale as she walked into another waiting room which was largely empty, with the exception of two other hellhounds waiting by the chairs; Loona immediately recognises the pair as being Esme and “Hellboy”, the latter of whom she unfortunately never got the name of, aside from his online nickname.

Esme was the first to almost immediately acknowledge Loona’s presence, the female hellhound bounding up from her chair; “Loona! T-Thank fuck you made it,” she wearily exclaims.

“Y-Yeah, I did…” Loona stutters, managing to hold her composure; “How’s, uh… h-how's Morger? Is he still, you know…”

“We don’t know yet,” Esme calmly yet anxiously explains; “They’ve been preparing him for almost an hour now. They’re tryna stabilize his condition, and told us to wait out here.”

Loona nods somberly; “Any idea when they’ll let us in?”

“Not the foggiest…” Esme sadly replies; “Maybe another five minutes? We don’t know.”

In a twist of impeccable timing, the double doors swing open to reveal a doctor walking out with a clipboard in his hands. This prompts all three hellhounds to turn towards him, with “Hellboy” initiating the conversation:

“How’s it looking, doc’?” The male hellhound calmly inquires, though obviously desperate for definitive answers.

“We can’t say for certain yet, sir. It’s shaky at the moment,” the doctor explains in a serious tone, emphasizing the seriousness of Morger’s condition; “The good news is that we’ve managed to stabilize his condition for the time being. We’ve hooked him up to a drip and oxygen mask for now, just assisting in his breathing rate which is quickly stabilizing. Painkillers and an IV bag are being distributed through his forearm as we speak, which is aiding with the substantial bruising and blood loss which he has sustained. We can’t say for certain, but operations may be required in future for the fractures we have found in his legs, and we may need to keep him under sedation for the time being for the injuries he has sustained to his face and chest.”

“Can we see him yet?” Loona quietly butts in, her heart breaking as she takes in the multitude of measures needed to sustain Morger’s life.

The doctor nods slowly; “You can. Just be aware beforehand that he is under heavy sedation. Do follow.”

And with that, all three hellhounds are led in one small group through the double doors, walking in utter silence except for the sound of their steady collective footfalls, passing by room after room, deeper and deeper into the hallway which felt more like a labyrinth of dreary proportions. Loona dares not to peer into the rooms she passed, desperate to ignore them as her mind was set on the purpose of her visit in the first place – she hated hospitals, the sheer thought of them creeping her out.

After walking for what felt like a painful eternity, the doctor stops in front of a room to his immediate right, pushing the door gently open and allowing for the trio of hellhounds to walk right through. First “Hellboy” steps inside, then Esme, and at last with a brief second of hesitancy, Loona.

What Loona was confronted with shocked her to a near overwhelming degree, a sense of deep sadness rushing over her.

There he was; there was Morger – a top bouncer and hellhound of unmatchable courage – reduced to a sedated, battered and bruised mess. Morger’s eyes were closed as he slept, a neck brace completely supporting his neck from the sustained injuries. His arms were wrapped in countless

bandages which were blotched with tar-black blood, countless wires running into his left and right forearms; distributing blood, water, sedatives, and painkillers respectively. Upon his face was an oxygen mask, providing the patient with adequate oxygen for as long as medically needed. A heart monitor softly beeped to Morger's right to the side of his hospital bed in which he lay completely flat.

"Shit… H-Holy shit…" Loona whispers to herself though soft breaths, the hellhound slowly walking to the left bedside, staring into Morger's horribly beaten face.

Loona, Esme, and "Hellboy" all exchange somber glances to one another, none of them sure as of what to say in contribution to an already horrific turn of events. There was nothing that they could say or do which would alleviate the suppressive gravity of the situation, the trio resorting to sitting in complete and utter silence, merely wanting to be there for their friend, even if he was unconscious.

One thought stood out prominently within Loona's mind – a question:

Who could've done this?

…

In all actuality, Loona knew who exactly had done such a heinous and brutish act, yet she didn't want to admit it. Tears manifest within Loona's eyes which she promptly wipes away at once with the palms of both her hands, convincing herself that she needed to stay strong – for Morger; for Jim…

For herself.

Beep… Beep… Beep… Beep… Beep…

As she stands in the depressing silence of that room, with only the taunting beeping of the heart-rate monitor breaking the audible stillness in rhythmic soft bursts, Loona's moment of sadness turns into a feeling of stark seriousness and determination, realizing what must be done.

She must find Jack Foster.

Beep… Beep… Beep… Beep… Beep…

The Broken Man

There was an oppressive, desolate silence which filled the interior of the van as Loona sat dormant within the driver's seat in a state of near perpetual shock.

She had just left the hospital and was now sitting idle in the parking lot, taking the time to process what she had just witnessed for herself; a friend, who is usually more than capable of holding his own ground, in a state of horrendous vulnerability; possibly even on the verge of death. The emotionally devastating scene that Loona had been confronted with in the past hour was something she had previously deemed impossible; as if the concept of this already dreadful situation resulting in someone she considered her friend being harmed was nothing but a paranoid hypothetical.

But no longer was it just a lingering probability, instead now manifested into a present devastating actuality.

Loona's deeply troubled mind was full of everything and nothing simultaneously, the hellhound trying her hardest to discern what was fact and fiction; wanting to believe that this was just a bad dream while at the same time knowing full well that everything she had just laid her eyes upon was a reality. In addition, Loona felt every emotion yet none at all in tandem, the urge to begin crying was so unbelievably tempting, but try as she might, she couldn't muster any tears — not even a light whimper.

In short, Loona was a mess.

But she knew she needed to keep going; to soldier on and persevere. Breaking down now wasn't going to do her any good; if anything, to show weakness this far into her fight would most likely spell disaster for not only herself, but for everyone and everything she cared for as well. There was simply too much to lose if she faltered, which motivated Loona to continue to struggle on. But why? Why did all of this have to be so difficult? Now she was about to force herself to travel all the way back to Pride and find another mangy sinner to speak about Malloy with; a conversation which Loona had the gut feeling would more likely than not go nowhere!

Was everything she was doing now be worth anything in the end? Was she doing more harm than good by resisting? … Was she the cause of all this?

As she began doubting the feasibility of continuing onwards which caused her eyes to mist up with tears, a voice began to echo within her head in the form of a memory – one which stood out prominently. That dream she experienced the day prior… that "messenger's" weather-beaten voice echoed in her head, warning her over and over against despairing, for it would only lead to her downfall. The words of forewarning played over and over within the depths of Loona's mind, echoing in her ears which served to drown out the pessimism which had come before it. The old, raspy voice warning her against losing hope was so deafening and so present, sounding as if that mysterious old "messenger" was within a mere breath away. This prompted Loona to check her surroundings in case he was in the van with her, only to confirm to herself that, indeed, she was alone.

With a weary look about her face, Loona looks straight ahead at nothing in particular, temporarily disassociating with the world around her. Doing so allowed for the hellhound to begin her inner monologue, clearing away her thoughts of uncertainty and doubt in order to make a decision – a sense of direction. Loona gently closed her eyes and began taking slow and easy breaths as she formulated a plan in her head.

For a moment, there was almost frustrating mindless stagnation…

…

Then at last, after a series of calming breaths, a plan began to emerge. The plan in question contained a series of questions which Loona would ask in order to gain the answers she wanted– no! Not the answers she wanted… the answers she needed.

She NEEDED these answers!

Loona's eyes shoot wide open in this moment of newfound momentum before reaching over to the glove compartment and opening it, revealing a notebook and pen which was stored haphazardly inside. With a pen in her right hand and the notebook clasped in her left, Loona begins scribbling a list of prompt questions, trying her best to make them as discernable and as easy to understand to even the most simple-minded of sinners. It felt almost like a race against time; if the questions faded from her mind before she could write them all down, then she would have to start all over again, wasting even more precious time which Loona felt was quickly depleting.

In impressively neat cursive, the questions appeared one-by-one in rough dot points in descending order, the author practically straining herself to remember each individual prompt query with near photographic perfection;

Question One…

Q-Question Two…

…

Question Thr… F-Fuck– Three…

F-Four…

…

FIVE!!

After what felt like an eternity crammed into thirty grueling seconds, a loud and guttural sigh of relief broke the air around Loona as she finally concluded her comprehensive list of prompts! She slumps back into the driver's seat, giving herself some time to breathe after thinking hard on formulating every question to what she deemed to be near perfection. After catching her shallow breath, Loona stares back down towards the small opened notebook sitting in her lap, the questions standing out to her as if they held a sense of utmost importance – an assumption which the author had no doubt in her mind was fact.

Loona proofreads each and every individual question carefully through an intent squint, reading out every word under her breath to see if the phrasing sounded right. It didn't take too long for her to reach the final question, at last ticking every box in her head which confirmed that they were sound enough. With the questions at last ready at the hellhound's disposal, Loona flips the notebook shut and gently tosses it and the pen beside her on the passenger's seat. Looking back up from the passenger's seat, Loona comes face to face with the rear-view mirror, her reflection staring right back at her which revealed her outward appearance. She freezes, giving herself a moment to stare right back and examine what she saw.

What she saw was a hellhound; her red eyes full of stress and concern, as if the weight of the world was crushing her very being. The hellhound she saw had been through countless trials and

tribulations throughout her life, all of that experience showing through the expression she held on her face like a mask of hardened wax. Twenty-Two years of suffering and exhaustion had all led up to where she was now; with a job, with a father who loved her dearly in spite of her problems… and with friends. One thing Loona knew about the hellhound she saw in the midst of the reflection was for certain; she was not going to let some wretched, lowly, degenerate sinner take all of what she gained away from her.

And for all the anxiety and sorrow he had caused her and everyone around her? She was going to make him pay.

Loona's facial expression hardened into a look of deep seriousness and determination, proceeding to clench her teeth with fury as she turned the ignition key, allowing for the van to roar back to life! With her hands firmly grasping the steering wheel, she backs the van out of the parking space and speeds back out onto the open road, heading right back in the direction of Pride.

She was going to pay someone a visit.

"This is the place, right Nick?"

"You tell me, Robert. That's what it says on the obituary, don't it?"

"Y-Yeah, I suppose it did..."

Under the thick, blinding cover of darkness in the late moonlit hours of the bone-chilling night, a dark green Ford AU Falcon crawled its way across the gravel track to a stop in front of the entrance of a cemetery; the bright high-beams of the car's headlights illuminating the cast-iron entrance gate. An old sign stood to the right of the entrance, the lettering lightly weathered from years of standing the test of time, which read:

"Morrisvale General Cemetery — Est. 1871"

Within this unsuspecting vehicle shrouded in the pitch black were two individuals of dubious intent and of even more unsuspecting appearance. The driver of the vehicle – a middle-aged man with a full beard and a swept-back haircut – glared with tired yet collected alert eyes at the entrance of the cemetery, while the passenger to his left – a stockier man who was ten years the driver's junior with brownish-blonde hair and a wiry circle beard – sat uneasily with a slight nervous twitch, looking down at the cut-out obituary which listed the location of a recent burial.

"What do ya mean 'you suppose it did'?" The driver asks with impatience about his voice; "You got the address there in your hands. Does it say that this is the fucken location or not??"

"Yes, it does!" The passenger clarifies with exclamation; "Jesus Christ, Nick, lay off me for once!"

The driver shook his head with a defeated guttural sigh; "I can't understand ya, Robbo, I really can't… the fuck's up with ya?"

'Robbo' fidgeted with the paper nervously as he stared into the pitch darkness of the cemetery; "Oh, man in Heaven– We're diggin' up a body! That's what's up with me, Nick! Don't you see what's wrong with that?!"

'Nick' rolls his eyes, shrugging off the objection his passenger expressed; "So you're telling me you're fine with threatening and robbing people at knife-point, but you draw the fair dinkum line at digging up a body?"

'Robbo' nods sternly; "Yeah!"

The driver glares coldly towards his passenger, giving him a callous side-eye; "... Piss off with that pansy shit, Robert. This is what Victor wanted us to do, he wrote it in his final wishes in case he died. Vick's dead now, isn't he? … We're doing him good by doing this tonight. It'll only take us a few hours."

"Pah! 'A few hours'…" 'Robert' sarcastically mutters to himself as he gets out of the passenger's seat, following 'Nick' to the back of the vehicle who opens up its boot; "I've heard that one countless times…"

“Stop your whingin’, and grab a shovel.” Nick orders bluntly while pulling out a slightly rusty pointed shovel and an electric lantern, switching it on to light up the immediate area.

With compliance to the order albeit with heavy reservations about the idea, Robert acquires the second shovel available and a yellow handheld torch adjacent to it which he flicks on, producing its own source of adequate light. Pushed to the right of the boot’s interior in an unwrapped state was a large white sheet which was bundled together with a length of loose rope, hastily prepared for the extraction of a body. ‘Nick’ grabs this bundle of cloth and rope, holding it under his arms along with everything else he carried, before slamming the car boot shut and locking the vehicle.

“Come on. Let’s get this over and done with,” Nick mumbles as he begins walking, shining his torch in the general direction of the cemetery with the beam unveiling a few gravestones from out of the cover of darkness.

Robert follows suit with his own source of light in his left hands and the shovel in his right, resting the long-handled tool over his shoulder as he walks. The sound of an abundance of wild chirping crickets compensate for the lack of ambient noise as the wind sat eerily still. Nick was the first to approach the gate; the tall bearded man opened the latch of the gate before pushing it open with a long, drawn-out metallic scraping sound which reverberated through the air. Once the path was clear, the pair of “unsuspecting” individuals invite themselves into the grounds of the cemetery, the gravel pathway lightly crunching underneath their shoes as they ventured deeper and deeper. The eerily isolated pathway stretched further and further into the endless darkness as the two men walked ever deeper, their minds collectively set on getting their assigned job done, not wanting to stay for another minute than necessary.

“Christ sakes, where did they bury him…” Nick mumbles to nobody in particular, the beam of the electric lantern skimming over each gravestone they passed; “Robbo, does it say where exactly they put him?”

“Errr… Nup! Doesn’t say squat,” Robert replies after double-checking the obituary folded in his shirt pocket.

A frustrated growl sounded off from the bearded man as he got visibly frustrated, forcefully kicking up dirt with his right foot; “Oh for fuck sakes— ya kidding me?! So we’re just walking into more and more darkness and we don’t even know where they fucken buried this bastard?!”

“You agreed to this ruddy job, not me!” The stockier man exclaims in his own fit of frustration; “Hang on a second, he may be buried in the newer plots! Let’s keep it down, yeah? Someone might

hear us."

Nick shot Robert a baffled look; "Who the hell's gonna hear us out here? We're on the outskirts of town."

Robert shrugs as the pair of men continue their paces, passing even more gravestones which lit up from the glow of their torches; "Fuck if I know! Someone, knowing my luck…"

The bearded man threw off a dismissive gesture as he groaned with exhaustion, choosing not to answer the pessimistic sentiment. Sure enough, the petty back-and-forth between the pair ceased, allowing for the ambient sounds of the late hours to take over once more; most prominently the crickets and locusts which chirped all around them. As they walked in complete silence, the stockier individual began to shine his light directly against the gravestones he passed, seeing if he could read any of the names out of mild curiosity. With a slow and steady pace, he begins reading the names in his mind…

"Ivatt Thompson. 1826 – 1875"

…

"Margaret Leroy. 1850 – 1929"

…

"Arthur Brookes. 1945 – 2010"

…

"Madeline Stee–"

"Oh shoot, there he is!"

Robert snapped out of his hyperfixation as he turned back towards Nick's direction; "Did we find him??"

"Yeah, he's right over here!" Nick informs, pointing his lantern towards a lonely gravestone standing in a newly-established plot of land, completely separated from the surrounding graves which dotted the cemetery.

It was an eerie sight to behold, that much was for certain; with the lonesome, freshly-masoned gravestone sitting completely solitary with the rest of the grounds, looking right at home yet so ill-fitting in comparison to everything else around it. Directly in front of the gravestone was newly upturned soil where the six-foot hole had been dug, then later covered upon the delivery of the coffin to its rightful spot; judging by the fresh texture of this rich-brown soil, it seemed that the burial had taken place within the last fortnight. Carved and printed upon the face of the gravestone was a simple, blunt, and coldly indifferent indication of who laid buried within that solitary plot of ground:

"Victor Ian Malloy. 1947 — 2023"

Nick's determination to be over and done with his task was apparent as he strides towards the gravesite, walking right up next to the gravestone and setting his electric lamp beside it, illuminating the immediate area with enough light to work. He then grabs the handle of his shovel with both hands and forcefully jabs it into the upturned soil, only to find out that the dirt appeared softer, and much looser than he had expected. This struck the bearded individual as odd; surely the ground should've settled by now and hardened to a more solid degree. Was the burial of Victor Malloy's body more recent than he had first presumed? After no more than five seconds of stagnation, he chose to ignore this factor – probably for his own sanity's sake.

The bearded man's impatience only grew as he began digging with an initial heave of the shovel, immediately noticing the lack of help he was receiving with his partner-in-crime standing idle with deep reluctance.

"ROBBO!! You useless prick, get over here!!"

This ferocious call for help snaps Robert out of his reluctance, the stockier man stumbling over to the gravesite with shovel at the ready, immediately getting to work. With each portion of loosened

earth moved, more of the grave was revealed; the walls which made up the six-foot-deep hole emerged minute after minute. One minute turned into two minutes, then into three…

Four minutes…

Five minutes…

…

Ten minutes…

After the twelve-minute mark, the drawn-out silence was broken by a statement from Robert.

“I keep seeing them, yanno?”

Nick looked up from the business end of his shovel, right before he plunged it back down into the dirt; “Seeing what?”

“Those tall, shadowy bastards… I-I saw one last night, it was staring at me from my backyard, just behind me shed—-”

“You’re speaking out of your arse again, Rob,” Nick interrupts with no intention to tolerate delusions; “You saw nothing. I’m sure it was just your eyes being delusional – as usual.”

“I know what I saw, Nick,” Robert protests as he continues digging, finally reaching the five-and-a-half foot mark; “It was no delusion.”

The bearded man rubs his eyes and groans, proceeding to climb out of the hole with a grunt as he pulls out a cigarette; “Whatever you say… Look, just keep digging – we don’t have much left to go. I’m going for a smoke, call me when you’ve got the coffin open.”

Nick proceeds to wander off a few feet away from the excavation that was taking place, facing away from the hole as he lit up his cigarette. The mentally cathartic relief that he felt upon slowly drawing a puff of his cigarette was beyond blissful, allowing for his tired mind to release itself from the mental stresses of that evening. Soon enough, Nick's mind began to wander off into a world of its own as he stared off into the pitch-black—-

"Uhh… N-Nick? ... Nick??"

"What is it? Ya done??"

…

"Robbo?"

"... He's not in the coffin, Nick, there's… t-there's nobody in here."

…

"... What??"

"He's not in the—"

"What do ya mean he's not in the fucken coffin?!"

"Just come look! It's completely empty!!"

With an annoyed growl, Nick marches over to the excavation site, completely disbelieving that Victor Malloy wouldn't be inside his own goddamn burial ground! How couldn't he be? His name was literally set in the stone he laid below! But sure enough…

…

Sure enough, as Nick stood beside Robert and peered down into the hole with his eyes fixated to the lit-up coffin… nobody. There was nobody inside the coffin.

"What the fuck…" Nick mumbles to himself, unable to move his eyes away from the completely baffling display before him.

The two men stand in completely bewildered silence, briefly exchanging bewildered glances before looking back down into the six-foot hole once more. … Then came a sound; the faint sound of calculated footsteps off towards the direction of the cemetery's entrance. This foreboding sound causes both of them to jump, the pair of them immediately turning around to see who had just arrived!

At first, both men didn't know who or what exactly they expected to see. But one thing was for certain – they didn't expect to find "Him" standing before them; his rotted-corpse body standing completely upright, glaring at them both with pin-point yellow irises contained within his dark, empty eye-sockets.

With a crooked, sandpaper-like voice, the corpse-like figure speaks:

"Hello, boys."

After what felt like a grueling eternity on the road, Loona at last arrives on the outskirts of the city in Pride, pulling the van over to the side of the road and putting it in 'park'. The van's engine cuts off as she pulls the ignition key out of its slot, with Loona looking outwards in the immediate area, searching for the landmarks described by 'Francis Tyler' — more specifically, the "little cafe" which was supposedly "just down the road" from 'Jack Foster's' apparent hideout.

Luckily for Loona, she didn't have to search for long as she spotted the neon sign above a corner building which read "Handsome Devil's Cafe", marking the exact reference point she was looking for. Another more pressing factor that Loona couldn't help but notice was just how decrepit and shady the entire immediate area looked. There was no secret that a very good portion of Pride had an aesthetic problem, in conjunction with the rampant crime which took place in certain parts; in

saying this, there was something about this uncharted part of Pride which felt especially uninviting, causing Loona to become slightly more alert with her surroundings than usual. The last thing she wanted was to be caught off guard by some crazed maniac — after all, she was already about to face one off.

Grabbing a tall brown bag from inside the glove compartment, Loona swings the van door open and steps out, preparing herself for whatever may come her way. From the notes that she had written down, the hellhound had noted to herself that she was looking for a dilapidated three-storey building, with the top floor being in notably better condition than the rest of the building. The pressing question now was which direction was “down the road”; where she was currently staring towards, or behind her in the other direction?

“I won’t miss it my ass…” Loona mumbles to herself in mild inconvenience, before ultimately deciding to begin walking in the direction of where she is currently faced.

As she walks further away from the van, Loona couldn’t help but notice just how especially barren and derelict this part of the city was. Each building she passed seemed more decrepit and foul than the last; used needles and a foul lingering smell polluting the air which Loona likened to a scented mixture of burnt cigarettes, decay, and singed hair. The smell had gotten so horrible as the lone hellhound continued on, so much so that she began to feel nauseous, thus prompting her to cover her nose with her right hand in an attempt to block out the foul stench.

Two minutes had gone by, and by this point, Loona was becoming increasingly more frustrated. Not only was there no sign of this apparent “L-Shaped Building”, but the foul odor continued to sting her nose, causing her to lightly dry-heave once. Upon looking back behind her, she saw the van off into the far distance – it looked like a speck compared to the surrounding near-derelict buildings, behind an invisible wall of that continuous foul smell which she wished would just ‘fuck off already’! Luckily for the increasingly annoyed hellhound who was starting to lose her patience, as she rounded a corner which led off to the right, she at last found exactly what she was looking for.

Standing prominently within a dust and grime-ridden courtyard, guarded by a tall chain link fence, was a run down three-storey L-shaped apartment building. Its looming appearance matched exactly with the description Loona was given, especially with the dilapidated conditions of the first and second floors; their windows either completely boarded up and smashed, while the top floor remained in a comparatively more adequate state. The neglected courtyard below was cluttered with all sorts of crates, piles of trash composed of who-knows-what, and ugly, twisted heaps of what appeared to be of rusty metal.

With a desire to get this visit over and done with, and without a second's more of hesitation, Loona proceeds to walk right through the gate, entering into the courtya–

BANG!! — CRACK!!

"FUCK!!"

Loona's life flashes before her eyes as a bullet ricochets off the ground! Without a split seconds delay, the hellhound sprints towards a large crate and slides behind it, seeking cover from the apparent gunman! As Loona clenches her teeth clenched with her eyes widened in pure fear for her life, she hears a voice echoing from high above, on the third floor!

"You down there! State your business!"

Loona responds in kind; "THE FUCK ARE YOU SHOOTING AT ME FOR, ASSHOLE?!?"

"I don't take kindly to trespassers!" The guttural, masculine voice calls out with vigor; "It's best you leave now, woman! Otherwise I'll be inclined to turn your brains into a fine paste!"

"Just try me, dickweed!!" Loona yells out from behind the crate; "Can I explain myself, or is that too much to ask?!?"

There was a momentary silence, the gunman obviously considering his answer. After a few seconds, he answers; "You may!"

With this prompt to speak, Loona yells out again; "I'm here to see you, Jack! I need to ask you some questions!"

"How the FUCK do ya know my name?!"

"Do you know a guy called 'Francis Tyler'? He sent me to talk to you, said you could help me!" Loona states emphatically, her words echoing through the air from the volume of her piercing

voice!

“Like shit I’ll help ya, I don’t even know you!” The gunman callously replies; “Now get outta here, bitch! Or I’ll put ya down like the foul mutt you—-”

“I bought you a peace offering!!”

Upon hearing this claim, the gunman pauses; “... A what?!”

“Oh Christ on a– A PEACE OFFERING, JACKASS!!” Loona screams as she holds up the tall brown paper bag above the crate for the gunman to see; “SEE?! It’s Kentucky Bourbon, from the human world!”

“…Oh bugger, so it is…” The gunman exclaims in disbelief, his voice softened for a moment before raising it again; “You’re serious about seeing me, arentcha?”

“Noooo! I’m just here to sight-see!” Loona remarks with heavy sarcasm; “Stop wasting my goddamn time and let me come up! I’m not leaving until you give me answers – about your organized crime days!”

“Will you fuck off if I let you do that??”

Loona groans, rolling her eyes; “One-Hundred Percent! As if I want to hang around this shithole!”

“... Goddammit… alright, fine!” The gunman capitulates; “You may come up! But I’m warning you once, bitch, so get it right; one wrong move, and I paint your brains all over the ground! Now, walk calmly towards the entrance, then you can come up. There’s a flight of stairs you can take.”

Loona decides to do good by the direction, promptly getting up from her hiding spot, raising her hands above her head with the brown paper bag in her grip in a bid to prove that she meant no harm to the sinner — at least just yet. Even if Loona wanted to harm him, what could she do? She was being aimed at with a gun, and any surprise move would most likely end up with her being shot. The hellhound had no other choice but to bend to the sinner’s direction.

As she slowly walks towards the entrance to this dilapidated apartment building, Loona looks up cautiously towards the open window, observing the veiled figure which was armed with a rifle; one which was pointed directly at her. Soon as Loona walks right through the entrance doorway, she finds the concrete-built staircase which the occupant had told her to climb, each individual step covered with a noticeable layer of dust and grime from neglect. Loona's footfall echoes throughout the building as she begins climbing up, using her phone's flashlight to navigate through the gloomy atmosphere she was enveloped in.

There was no telling how exactly this encounter was going to turn out; whether it would be an overwhelming success or a complete and utter waste of effort, thus exhausting precious time which the hellhound didn't have the liberty to lose. Loona thought about this as she continued to climb further up the winding dingy staircase, passing the first floor and steadily approaching the second. As she climbs ever further, Loona hears the echo of a door creaking open loudly, the hinges groaning from years upon years of neglect and decay on the floor just above her, drowning out Loona's footsteps as she steps onto the third and final flight of stairs upwards.

Halfway up as she turns right where the stairs wind up to the third floor, the sinner's voice calls out again, this time more methodical and calculated in his gruff tone; "You're unarmed, arentcha luv'?"

"I'm not your 'love', you fucking creep!" Loona growled in a low tone of disapproval; "I got nothing on me, just your hooch and some other crap."

After much anticipation, Loona at last reaches the third floor, the condition of this floor that much cleaner than the rest of the building, showcasing the sole resident's unexpected skill of housekeeping; especially considering that he was a squatter. Loona steps into the hallway of the third floor, looking down towards her left to find the sinner staring right back at her from the doorway which he peeks. Upon seeing his… interesting appearance, the hellhound visitor was genuinely taken aback.

Up until this point, Loona wasn't sure exactly what this 'Jack Foster' individual would look like in his outward appearance. If anything, a part of her expected him to look similar to what either Malloy or Francis Tyler looked like — either a disheveled corpse of a man, or a man-rodent-looking-thing. What she didn't expect to see was the actual form to which 'Jack Foster' had taken.

To say that 'Jack Foster' looked "unsettling" would be both an understatement and an overstatement simultaneously. As Loona had observed from the courtyard when she looked up, he was — indeed — a veiled figure with a dark-brown hood draped over his head, and sitting on his face was a beige gas mask with blacked-out goggles which looked so incredibly dated. The gunman

was also wearing a dark-green trench coat and combat trousers, complete with a pair of black high ankle boots. Strapped over his shoulders and crossing over his chest were a pair of brown bandoliers crossing over one another, with each individual slot containing a lethal brass bullet, glimmering under the light just above the sinner. While there was nothing remarkably unnerving about 'Jack Foster's' appearance on its own, there was something about the aura which radiated off him which Loona didn't trust one bit.

Loona's eyes shifted as she examined the idle man standing before her, before speaking; "So, what? You just gonna stand there and look at me, or… what are we doing here?"

The figure shrugs slowly; "Just examining you," he mumbles, his voice echoing as if he was speaking through a glass bottle.

Loona became bemused, if not somewhat defensive; "Excuse me? Let's get one thing straight with you, jackass; I REALLY don't like being eyeballed."

The cloaked figure doesn't react, continuing to coldly glare at the hellhound before nodding slowly; "Gotcha. Aight come in, let's get this bullshit over with..."

Did he just imply she was bothering him? The fucking nerve…

After an extra moment or two of reluctance on Loona's part, she finally makes her way into 'Jack Foster's' living quarters. Before she even stepped in, the smell of flavored cigar smoke hit her nostrils, causing her nose to flinch slightly in reaction.

Loona took to examining the living space before her, surprised to find that the sinner didn't live in complete squalor; in fact, it seemed as if he had been doing some housekeeping, especially with the second-hand lightly worn furniture which was kept surprisingly clean, along with the old-style plasma television which appeared to be fully functional. There was a run down coffee table sitting in front of two dilapidated chairs, positioned roughly towards the direction of the TV for easy viewing. Off to the left of the TV was an old fridge, obviously turned on by the monotone whirring sound which emanates from it. Directly beside the fridge was a slightly rusty gun safe, an old rifle with a small scope leaning up against the doors; this was most likely the gun 'Jack Foster' had used to fire a warning shot towards the unsuspecting hellhound.

Aside from this select space with a singular yellowish light hovering above the scene, the rest of the singular room was a mess; piles of bullet casings and all sorts of debris and trash scattered into

corners as if the immediate area had seen war. The walls had numerous cracks which brought into question the structural integrity of the room – if not the entire building – and the dull wallpaper had become shriveled and torn in huge chunks, sagging down like vines towards the unkempt floor.

With an abrupt and gruff exhale, ‘Jack Foster’ waltzes methodically towards the coffee table where a cigar simmered away, lifting up the respirator covering his mouth without revealing his face and taking a light puff. After a slow draw of the lit flavored cigar, he gently blows the smoke back out before letting go of the gas mask’s respirator, the apparatus returning back to his face which hadn’t been revealed. One thing that did strike Loona as “off” about this particular sinner was how everything behind his generously-covered attire appeared blackened – as if there was no skin or tissue of any sorts to begin with, instead just a dark, shadowy mass contained within a tomb of thick clothing.

Loona stands with alertness, not once taking her eyes off the unsettling, unpredictable sinner, cautious about what he may try to pull off next. Her alertness doesn’t alleviate at all, even when ‘Jack Foster’ began speaking once more, his voice echoey from behind his face covering; “You’re skittish about me, arentcha?”

Loona doesn’t answer. Instead, she continues glaring cautiously at the squatter, analyzing his every move.

‘Jack Foster’ grunts; “You wanna know somethin’? I really don’t wanna harm ya, woman. I don’t have the energy anymore. If I wanted to kill you, I would’ve driven a bullet right between your eyes down in the courtyard there. I could’ve easily done it by now… at least I used to be able.”

The sinner then gestures his glove-veiled hand between himself and Loona; “Look how close we are to each other – if I tried anything, you’d rip me to shreds easily. I’m a broken man; I no longer have the energy to do anything against anyone.”

Loona let out a scoff; “I’m still watching your every move. Be careful around me.”

‘Jack Foster’ returns the warning with his own scoff; “Ditto…” he states coldly, grunting as he slumps himself into one of the chairs in front of the coffee table, facing Loona; “Are you gonna ask me those fucken questions or what?”

The hellhound nods slowly, glaring at the sinner in a state of vulnerability; “Yeah. Yeah, I’m gonna ask the ‘fucking questions’.”

“Give me that Bourbon first,” the sinner bluntly orders, holding out his hand as if he was expecting it already.

This gesture caused Loona great annoyance, abruptly handing over the tall bottle of alcohol to the sinner who practically yanks it out of her hands. The sinner lifts it out of the brown paper bag, his goggles lined up to analyze the bottle intently.

After confirming to himself visually that this was “the stuff”, he looks back towards Loona and chuckles; “See? Now we’re even. Go on, start ya interrogation.”

Loona was about to lash out at the sinner for being so dismissive before she stops herself, realizing that she didn’t have the time to do so. Loona grunts dismissively, before then looking down at the notebook held in her hand with the questions staring right at her, ready to be utilized.

“Here goes nothing…” Loona thinks to herself, looking back up from her first question and relaying it to the sinner sitting idly before her; “So you’re Jack Foster, right?”

“That I am,” the sinner confirms in his growling voice, his posture completely stiff within the chair, his arms resting on the sturdy armrests; “What’s it to you? Why are you asking?”

“Because I need your help with someone,” Loona informs, getting straight to the point.

“With someone, huh? Oh hell, do I know a lotta ‘someones’… Who exactly?”

“You familiar with a guy named ‘Victor Malloy’?”

“…Victor Malloy?…”

Loona notices a slight yet notable change in the sinner’s appearance, noticing how he had become apprehensive upon hearing the name. After pausing for a few brief seconds, Jack Foster leans

forward in his seat, a hint of uneasiness plaguing his voice; "...Is that what this is about? About him?"

The hellhound blinks; "Uhh, yeah."

"...Christ…" Jack Foster swears from under his breath, becoming hesitant to say any more than he needed to.

It was becoming increasingly obvious to Loona that the very mention of Malloy seemed to unsettle anyone and everyone associated with him. It was quelle surprise that he terrified those around him anyhow, especially with how seemingly unpredictable yet methodical he was; especially with this most recent attack on a friend of Loona's, resulting in his hospitalization.

Loona wastes no time at all, moving on to her next question; "Were you associated with Mal—"

"Do you have any idea what you're getting into, woman?" The veiled sinner interrupts with a deep seriousness to his gruff, echoey voice.

The hellhound stares at him, unimpressed with his courage to interrupt; "Yeah I do, that's why I'm asking. Don't interrupt me again, got it?"

"…Right," Jack Foster agrees, choosing to comply.

Loona clears her throat before repeating; "With Malloy, were you associated with him?"

With almost immediate response, the sinner nods meekly, seemingly reluctant to admit such a fact. He repositions himself within the chair before elaborating; "I was, and for a long time at that. We went back years, Vick and I. … I met him down in Victoria at a Painters and Dockers Union board meeting in the early eighties. We got to talkin' about our ideals and the way we believed the union should be handling itself, and other smaller things we believed in. We became mates through the union, and then later on… practically became his right-hand man in that gang he led. … I haven't seen that prick in four years… n-nor do I wanna see him."

Jack Foster looks up towards Loona, his tinted goggles peering right towards her; “You wanna know why I dress like this?”

Loona shrugs; “Not really. But you’re gonna tell me anyway, aren’t you?”

“It’s to hide what I’ve become,” Jack Foster continues in an apprehensive tone, ignoring Loona’s question; “I can’t bear to look at myself anymore, so I hide myself away. My body and soul is wretched, I don’t recognise it. This? How I look now underneath this... respirator and goggles? This isn’t me… This isn’t even my body, I-I don’t even recognise my own face. This body; i-it’s held together by some… sick ritual bullshit. He experimented on me, woman, that’s what he did — experimented on my soul…”

The hellhound blinks a couple of times, mildly taken aback by the wretched sinner’s mindless rambling. It doesn’t take long for Loona to regather her train of thought, moving onto the next question; “How well did you know him?”

A fit of loud wheezing laughter emanates from behind Jack Foster’s gas mask upon hearing this question, before then turning into a horrible, phlegm-like coughing fit:

“Heh… heheheeHEHEH— HAHAAA— A-ACK!! ARRGHHH!! AHEM!! Heheehhh… Ohhhh… matey, lemme tell ya… I knew him more than most. He was like a… a brother to me, yanno? I helped him, he helped me. For twenty years we built our little empire of drug dealin’ and gun smugglin’, and what did he end up doing? He stabbed me in the back… took me ‘round the back and literally blew me fucken brains out when I least expected it. … Who would’ve guessed that the bastard was into witchcraft and black magic, hey? I didn’t, ‘til the last minute. And by then, it was too late to realize what exactly we had been doing all those years – what I had been inadvertently helping him with. … I suffer for my naivety, yanno? I suffer for it now…”

Loona raises her brow in curiosity, a sense of optimism beginning to form that maybe progress was being made.

She asks a follow-up question; “What do you know about him?”

The sinner shrugs weakly; “That depends. What do ya wanna hear about him?”

Loona throws her hands in the air as she shakes her head; “I don’t know, tell me about how he works – why he operates the way he does.”

Although there was no visible eyebrow for Jack Foster to raise, Loona knew from his faint change in posture that he was growing curious of her intentions in asking these very specific questions.

Regardless of his curiosity, the sinner obliges by answering as best he could; “One thing you gotta understand about Vick is that he operates methodically and carefully. That’s how he was able to get away with much of the shit that he did. That’s how we never got caught. He will only ever strike when he feels the time is right; he always loved dragging shit out and playing mind games. Thinking about it now… I believe the reason as to why he only deals the “killing blow” at very specific times has got to do a lot with the black magic he practiced in his life.”

“So I’ve heard…” Loona wholeheartedly agrees with her mind fixated on the topic.

“... Let me ask you something for a moment, lady,” Jack Foster insists; “Why are you so interested about Vick? … He’s after you, isn’t he?”

Loona snorts; “Why should I tell you? It’s none of your damn business why I’m asking.”

“Maybe if you tell me a little bit, I’ll be able to help you more?” the sinner proposes, leaning back into his seat while maintaining eye-contact with the hellhound standing over him a few feet away.

Dammit, he’s got a point…

Albeit with a moment of reluctance, Loona forces herself to give further insight into the situation she was in.

“Ugh, fine. Are you listening? Okay. … I’ve got a friend, and Malloy is after him. For five days, I’ve been standing in the way of what he wants. And now, because of that? He’s more than likely after me as well! I need you to help me by telling me the answers that I need.”

“What’s your friend’s name, huh?” Jack Foster inquires, his voice monotone yet engaged in the topic.

“I’m not telling you that,” Loona flatly deflects the question; “Just tell me what I need to know.”

This brings the hellhound onwards to her third question she had written down; “Why does Malloy want to kill my friend?”

Jack Foster thinks on the question, before providing his definitive answer; “You know how I said that Vick’s methodical? One of the things that he did well was when he went after people, he would only go after those who were in his… i-in his “direct line of sight”, you could say. How he works is this; if you’ve got someone who is close to you, whether that be a close friend, an associate, or a family member, and they’ve either signed a deal with Vick or they have gone and done wrong against him, then you immediately become one of his targets. We never went after anyone who was “out of the loop”. If we did that, then we were at greater risk of being caught.”

“... W-What are you implying?” Loona asks intently as she squints her eyes, trying to figure out what this meant with regards to Jim’s case.

The sinner shrugs once more; “Maybe somebody set your mate up for death. Someone close to him. Vick never went after people without any incentive or motive to do so, there was always a reason.”

Although this was definitely the helpful and constructive answer which Loona was looking for, new questions began to arise within her mind as to who the person guilty of effectively signing Jim’s death warrant was; this new lingering question stuck like super-glue once it was realized.

Loona moves onto her next question – the forth written down in the notepad. This one was perhaps the most important to ask; “Do you know how we can stop him?”

Jack Foster shook his head somberly, delivering the physical response in a way which was slow and deliberate, emphasizing the point; “You can’t. Only death can stop him, and even then, with all the deals he’s done with those fucked up beings from the deepest depths of this awful realm… who’s to say he’ll even stop then? … The only thing you can do, I believe from what I’ve heard… is to break the cycle.”

The cycle?

Loona became restless, desperate for the sinner to elaborate; “What cycle? T-The fuck are you talking about??”

There was another phlegm-like cough which reverberates from behind the sinner's mask, before he explains; “A-ACK!! Argh… Haven’t done much research, have ya? Not that I blame ya, really. It’s not as if it’s well known... There’s an annual “cycle” that Vick works within, has to do with these… beings he’s made deals with. The deal goes something like this, it’s very simple; Vick provides a soul for these beings to claim sometime in the middle of the year through a ritualistic killing. In exchange for this offering, they leave him — the “host” of their immortality — alone until the following year when it starts all over again. All that Vick needs is a body, and the necessary resources to perform the ritual itself, usually containing a knife and some other things of some description.”

The highly attentive hellhound observes as Jack Foster took a moment to puff on his cigar once more, blowing out the smoke once more before continuing; “The only way to break the cycle… is to destroy the “hive”, the ritual site, through fire. Doing that will erase the “hive” completely, and the beings will have to start all over again and find a completely new host; someone dumb enough to summon them again. Breaking the cycle will also damn Vick to those shadowy being’s wrath, ‘cause they’ll see that he was unable to sustain them. And then? Well… then he will be dragged down to their realm with them, where they’ll sustain themselves off him as the “host”. Because Vick is the effective “host” of their entire life-force, those beings will be able to live off him without the need for another sacrifice for… endless centuries.”

Loona stands motionless, completely disoriented with the amount of information thrown her way, causing a bead of sweat to form upon her furrowed brow. If anything, Loona was beginning to feel the weight of the amount of mind-boggling information she had to remember.

Just before Loona could move onto her next question, the sinner interrupted her; “Don’t tell me… You’d like to know where this “hive” is exactly, don’t you?”

Loona froze in place, mildly stunned that the sinner was able to guess her next question. Her eyes flick between the notebook and back up towards the sinner before she nods, confirming the assumption.

Jack Foster exhales shakily; “Vick was always very secretive with where he performed his rituals. He barely told another soul which he didn’t trust to a high enough degree. The only person he told upfront, from what I can remember, was this… old hag who lives in this secluded old homestead, somewhere between Morrisvale and Kilgowie. Why did Vick tell her? … She was just as morally

depraved as him; that's why he trusted her to keep the exact location secret. I think she's still alive, but last time I saw her, she was slowly becoming decrepit with this chronic condition she has… I know she's still alive, otherwise I would've seen her mug down here with the rest of us already."

"Are you sure she's still alive?" Loona asks almost immediately.

Jack Foster grunts; "Maybe? I'm not sure. She's probably on the verge of death for all I know, maybe just hanging on."

Loona had come to a conclusion within the last few seconds; if she could find this foretold 'old hag', then she would be able to find out the exact location of the "hive", allowing her the opportunity to stop this whole mess once and for all. At last, the end was within her sights.

Without hesitation, the hellhound makes a demand; "Her name. Tell me her name, right now!"

For a moment to himself to remember, Jack Foster bows his head in thought. Loona waits idly by with her patience quickly waning, though luckily for her, she didn't have to wait long for an answer.

Finally, the sinner raises his head, looking back towards the hellhound towering over him; "Her name's Harriet — 'Harriet Edgecliffe'. If you can find that old crone and get her to squeal about what she knows, I'm sure she'll absolutely tell you where Vick's little ritual hideout is. You're a massive wolf-looking thing, so I'm sure you'll have no problem with getting it outta her."

Loona wastes no time in quickly jotting down the name in the notebook, also making note of the rough location as to where to find this rumored old woman. As she finished writing the note down, Loona hoped to an almost desperate degree that this 'Harriet' was still alive, thus making it easier for the hellhound to track her down and interrogate for answers by any means possible.

The hellhound's attention is drawn back up towards Jack Foster as he asks bluntly; "Is that all ya want from me? Are we finally done here?"

Loona nods with a serious look within her eye; "Yeah. We're done here."

Without saying another word, Loona turns back around and starts heading towards the door, not wanting to stay around in this foul, uninviting derelict building any longer than she needed to be.

Just as she was about to leave, Jack Foster calls back out to her; “Wait a minute. Before you go, there’s something I feel I should give to ya.”

Loona instinctively turns around, confused as to what exactly this ‘something’ would be. Her initial caution about this particular sinner began to arise once more, readying herself in case he tried to pull off anything which would endanger her. From the doorway, she watches as Jack Foster heaves himself up from his chair with a wheeze, crackling his back before trudging his way slowly towards Loona with something enclosed within his left hand.

He stops just a few feet away from Loona and opens up his hand, revealing… a bullet — but not just any bullet. The bullet in question seemed to glow lightly with a silvery-white hue, signifying that it had been blessed. Loona examines the bullet, becoming intrigued by the sight, before then looking back up towards the sinner holding it within his glove-veiled hand.

Jack Foster speaks for one final time; “You should take this with ya — it’s a blessed bullet. You may need it. I don’t think it’ll do much in the way of crippling Vick completely, but I’m sure it’ll buy you some time in case he comes after you. As I said; I’m a broken, damned man with many skeletons in my closet. I don’t have much use for such a thing. … You should hurry now; I don’t think you have much time left.”

After informing Loona of the item he held, he drops it into her hands before stepping backwards, giving a light nod in farewell. Initially, Loona doesn’t react to the gesture, more fixated on the blessed bullet lying within the palm of her hand. After closing her fingers around it, she looks back up towards the sinner, unsure of what to say or how to react. A few more quiet seconds go by before Loona finally turns back around and begins leaving, heading back towards the stairwell to begin her descent, her phone’s flashlight once more lighting the way.

Time was running out, and Loona knew it.

Diving Deeper

RIIIIIIIIINNNNG … RIIIIIIIIINNNNG … RIIIII–

"Yeah, 'ello?"

"Sergei, you there? It's Vasily."

"Vasil'! Good morning! How are things with you?"

"They could be better, Sergei, they could be better. How's my sister?"

"Oh, she's doing great! The doctors have prescribed her with some medicine for that illness she has. She's been better ever since!"

"Excellent. Anyway, look, I won't waste your time – I'm calling you because I'm needing your help with something. It's important. Have you watched the news lately?"

"Uh.. Da? I have, why do you as– OH! I-Is this about that missing person?"

"Yes it is. I've been involved since day one pretty much."

"A-And how's that going?"

"I can't say much because most of the things are confidential, but nothing's turned up. We've been having volunteers search the woods for the past day or two; nothing."

"Hrrrm… So I take it you're not in Toowoomba at the moment?"

“Nyet. If you want to come see me if I have time, I’m in a town called ‘Morrisvale’.”

“Right. So what did you need help with?”

“Two things. … Argh! Look, I’m certain something else is going on here, and I don’t like it.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re familiar with the supernatural, correct? A-About evil spirits?”

“I… don’t much like talking about it, but yes I am.”

“Okay, good. … I-I’m not sure if you’ll believe me, but a few days ago, I was attacked by this tall, dark beast when I was investigating the missing man’s house.”

“A… A-A beast, you say?”

“I don’t know what it was. All I know is that I shot at it, it screamed out this awful deafening sound, and then tried to drag me away! There was this awful feeling hanging around in the air, even before I stepped foot into the house. D-Do you know what it could be??”

“Gospodi, pomiluy… I-I don’t know! It sounds like a… a demon, maybe? A ghoul, even! I’m so sorry, Vasil’, this is all so sudden to hear. D-Do you need a blessing?”

“I think I’ll be okay, Sergei. If anything, that house may need to be blessed – I may arrange it. If you could pray for me, however, it would be much appreciated.”

“Of course.”

“Hm.”

“...What was the other thing?”

“The other thing is this patch of white and dark gray hair I found on the floor. I have it in my hands right now, actually; to me, it looks like it belongs to a large dog.”

“Is that so?”

“Da.”

“How big are we talking?”

“Massive! There’s also this dirt track of huge paw prints leading into the house. They’re as big, if not bigger than my shoes, Sergei, and they’re almost a size fifteen!”

“That is interesting… Maybe they came from a wolf? A wild dog??”

“No, I don’t think so, they’re far larger! If they were, the DNA results would come back saying so. The results just say that they belong to a.. ‘large unidentified dog breed’.”

“Hm… This may sound a little bit unbelievable, Vasil’, but… From the sounds of that, and considering the other thing with that “beast”... y-you may be dealing with a ‘tserber’ or something similar.”

“A… A tserber? As in a hellhound??”

“Either that, or even more unbelievable, perhaps even… well, uhh… maybe even a “werewolf” of some kind.”

“Hmph. Anything’s possible at this point... I’m starting to doubt if we’ll ever find this man; dead or alive.”

“Let’s hope you do… What does he look like again?”

“You haven’t seen his face?”

“Not as of yet. I’ve only heard about it on the radio so far.”

“Stand by, Sergei, I’ll send you a picture of him.”

“Right.”

…

“I see… S-So you say that’s the missing man, is it??”

“Yes.”

“... Vasily, I met him the other day!”

“... I’m sorry? W-What was that??”

“This man! I-I saw him the other day, he’s not missing!”

“Where?!”

“Down in New South Wales, at this motel we stopped at! H-He was with this girl, and we got to talking with them!”

“My God… W-Which town did you say this was in??”

“Uhhh… Buckland! It’s called Buckland!”

“Right then. I’ll hang up now and give the station down there a call. Thank you so much for calling, Sergei, I-I’ll talk to you later!”

“Of course, good luck!”

Click!

An agonizing fit of coughing and spluttering echoes through the halls of the palace as Octavia paces through the hallway with a bowl of hot herbal soup and tea, swiftly making her way towards her father’s bedroom where the horrible sound originated. Octavia was cursing to herself as she pressed onwards with the hot bowl beginning to scorch her hands, making sure to adjust her hold on the fine china so as not to drop it. Escorting the owlet on either side were a pair of imp servants; the imp to Octavia’s left was carrying a pile of warm towels, whilst the imp to her right was carrying an umpteenth box of tissues.

For the past two days, Stolas had taken ill and was practically bed-ridden, having developed a simple and negligible sniffle on the first day which only worsened as the day progressed. It was now day two of this terrible bout of illness, and the owl prince had been reduced to an unkempt and weak mess, with just about enough energy to walk from the bathroom and back. Throughout the palace walls, there were whispers of unhelpful rumors and theories as to how Stolas had gotten so tremendously ill, ranging from everything such as the lowly classes spreading the disease through the general public, to downright poisoning of a secret undercover assassin. Of course, there was no truth to these paranoid speculations, yet in spite of this, there was still active suspicion within the palace’s inner circle.

Even more nauseating chesty coughing echoes out into the hallway as Octavia, along with her entourage, make the final approach to Stolas’ room where another imp stood guard; this one

occupying the profession of a nurse, surprisingly enough. Almost immediately, the female imp notices Octavia, placing her hands behind her back to maintain a formal presentation to the prince's daughter. Octavia, however, didn't care about formal presentation at this time — or ever, for that matter.

This was made evident with her question towards the nurse; "How's it looking? I-Is he getting any better, or what?"

The imp nurse adjusts her glasses with one hand as she answers the question; "Not as of yet, your highness, but your father's condition has at least stabilized since yesterday. I've prescribed him some pain relief medication, which I've placed beside his bed. He'll need two pills every four hours with a drink, a warm one preferably, to improve his condition in the long run."

Octavia grew concerned, despite the good news; "H-How long will it take for him to recover?"

"With the medication and the hot servings you're providing? Within two or so days," the nurse informs reliably, her expertise evident in the way she expresses the prognosis with a comforting certainty.

The owlet sighs softly, exhausted from all of the stresses and concerns she had about her father; "Huff… Okay… O-Okay, that's—that's great to hear. Heh… Wait, so, do we know what he's caught exactly?"

The nurse shrugs, at a loss; "We don't know exactly, but it seems to resemble a type of common cold. There's no risk of fatality from it, however, so there is no need to worry about that."

"That's good…" Octavia nods, her eyes darting between the door to her father's room which was slightly ajar, before glancing back towards the imp nurse standing guard in front of it; "I-Is it safe to go inside and see dad? I've got some stuff for him."

The nurse nods her head; "You may," she simply responds, stepping aside before pushing the door gently open for the owlet.

Octavia quietly thanks the nurse as she steps inside her father's room, making sure to keep the bowl of hot herbal soup steady and upright in her grasp. As her eyes adjusted to the dimmed relative

gloominess of her father's room, another short burst of coughing could be heard coming from the owl prince's bed. It didn't take long for Octavia to finally make out the contents of her father's room; the familiar walls, furniture, and drawn curtains jutting out at her peripheral vision. Directly in front of her, a few feet away, was her father's bed with a lone occupant lying dormant within it, shrouded in the bed's comforting, silky sheets.

The lone occupant was, of course, none other than Stolas, in the most pitiful condition that Octavia had ever seen him in recent memory. His feathers were all tattered and messed, looking as if they had been frayed, and his eyes were full of so much fatigue, that it was near impossible for him to open them by any more than a few measly inches. An almost empty box of tissues lay to the left of Stolas' head, the last ply of tissue paper loosely jutting out of the opening. Each breath that the owl prince took sounded labored in a testament to just how awfully sick he had become within no more than forty-eight hours.

Octavia's heart felt heavy for having to see her father in such a horrible state, causing her a considerable deal of worry for his prognosis. With a quiet, careful step, she comes to Stolas' side where he lay completely flat, setting the bowl of soup on the nightstand beside her, carefully sliding it onto its surface before turning back to see the owl prince. Despite her obvious presence, it appeared as though Stolas hadn't noticed his daughter standing by his bedside; his gloomy, tired eyes having since closed for a rest. Via decides to make herself known to him, wanting to tend to the hunger that he must be feeling, having not eaten over the past twenty-four hours due to his lack of energy to do so.

The owlet gently whispers; "Dad… Psst, Dad? … Hey, Dad."

Stolas' eyes flutter weakly open, a lowly and sick groan growling from his mouth, before speaking with a terribly hoarse voice; "*Oughhhhh*... Via…? Via, is that you…?"

Octavia nods; "Yeah, it's me dad. I'm here. … I-I bought you some soup."

In spite of his painfully obvious lack of energy, the owl prince weakly musters a crooked smile; "Oh, Via… Via, my little star-child, thank you so much… I am terribly hungry…"

"I figured as much," Octavia softly states, watching as her father weakly props himself upright within his bed in order to eat; "Do… Do you need me to feed it to you?"

A weak chuckle splutters from Stolas, before being interrupted by a light cough; “A-Ahem!… I-I think that will be required, Via… *Ough*... I am so sorry for making you do this…”

“Don’t sweat it, dad. Just please, focus on getting better for me,” Octavia gently reassures as she carefully grabs the bowl in one hand and the spoon in the other, scooping up a small portion of the warm concoction and hovering it over towards her father’s mouth; “Open up.”

Though it took him a moment to muster his strength once again, Stolas manages to part his mouth slightly ajar, just enough for Octavia to delicately feed him the first mouth-watering spoonful of herbal soup. As soon as the concoction hits the owl prince’s taste buds, he begins savoring just how wonderful it tasted, providing him with a feeling of pleasant warmth in direct contrast to the temperatures that he had been getting on and off. Stolas holds the herbal soup within his mouth for a few seconds, wanting this pleasant taste to last forever, before at last swallowing it gently, the serving sliding down his hoarse and scratchy throat.

Through his weak eyes, Stolas looks towards his daughter and smiles weakly once more; “Oh, Via… Via, that tastes so wonderful… D-Did you— ***cough, cough!*** D-Did you—***Ahem!***— make this yourself…?”

“I tried to, at the very least,” Octavia admits, dipping the spoon back into the bowl for another serving; “There was a recipe I found online, said it would treat anything from a cold to a flu. Let’s hope it’s not bullshit…”

“You’ve done a marvelous job regardless, my starshine…” Stolas hoarsely encourages, managing to formulate a sentence without devolving into another agonizing fit of coughing. One thing that the bed-ridden owl did note of was how his throat had been soothed almost immediately after swallowing his first portion of soup.

“Yeah, yeah… Enough talking, dad. You’re straining your throat,” Octavia warns softly as she serves him another spoonful of soup, focusing on her father’s recovery more than anything else for the moment.

While the teenage owl tends to her ill father, the pair of servant imps get to work with lightly tidying up their master’s bed, disposing of the used tissues which lay haphazardly across the bed sheets, and replacing the empty tissue box with a fresh one, ready to be used. Complete silence filled the bedroom to accommodate for the fierce migraine that Stolas had acquired due to his illness, with everyone present being careful not to make too much noise in case it caused the sick owl any additional discomfort. It didn’t take long for the pair of imp servants to wrap up their

respective duties, quietly informing Octavia that they were finished and removing themselves from the bedroom at once, leaving Via and her father alone in the company of each other.

For a short while, the two owls were left completely to their own devices; Octavia continued to slowly feed her father with spoonful after spoonful, while Stolas focused on his own recovery. This uncompromising silence continued for the next five minutes, only to be broken by a faint and polite knock on the door. The owlet turns around to glance towards the door, turning back towards her father and telling him that she would be back. After setting down the nearly empty bowl of herbal soup, Octavia approaches the door and opens it carefully, revealing an imp servant who was holding her phone.

The imp servant clears his throat; “Sorry to bother you, your highness. Someone wishes to speak to you,” he informs, before handing the phone to its owner.

Octavia raises her eyebrow in curiosity, grabbing the phone off the servant before holding it up to her ear. The owlet answers; “H-Hello?”

“Via, it’s Loona.”

Via is taken by surprise, causing her to blink; “O-Oh, Loona! Hey. H-How’s it going?”

A gruff sigh emanates through the speaker; *“Argh! You know... Just stressed as fuck at the moment.”*

“Heh. Trust me, I’m there too,” Octavia chuckles with cold humor; “Dad’s been really sick for the past two days.”

“Really?” Loona sounded taken aback; *“What from??”*

Octavia shrugs; “We don’t know. It’s like the flu, but almost five times worse. He’s been bedridden since he caught it, and we’ve had to bring a specialist nurse in from sloth. He’s getting better now, but we’ll see how we go.”

"Crap. That's rough, Via. I-I'm sorry to hear," Loona expresses her condolences; *"I hope he gets better."*

Via nods soberly; "Me too… So what's up, why did you call?"

"...O-Oh right!" Loona exclaims, stuttering before getting straight to the point; *"I might need your help with something. It's important, and I thought you might know a bit about it."*

"Ohh-kay…?" Octavia replies, somewhat confused; "Fill me in, I'll try to help you. Wait— before you say anything more, is this about Jim?"

The hellhound huffs through the receiver; *"Yep. Exactly. He's with dad at home."*

"Wait, he's still down here??" Octavia asks with genuine surprise.

"At the moment? Yeah," Loona sighs; *"Nothing much has changed with where I'm keeping him. A-Anyway, sorry. We're getting off track again. You've got books about dark spirits and beings, right?"*

The owlet stammers a little, tripping over her words for a second; "I, um— Y-Yeah I do, plenty of them! Why do you ask?"

With this prompt to talk, Loona explains her reason for inquiring; *"I've been asking around, talking to some sinners connected to the hit against Jim, and I keep hearing about these… "beings" that want his soul or something. I want to figure out exactly what they are, and how much time I have left."*

"Oh fuck… o-okay, uh… Hang on a minute. I'll go to the study room, see if I can find a book. I might be able to help you with this," Via says, wasting no time at all in making her way back down the hallway, effectively putting Loona on hold.

In what felt like no time at all, Octavia enters the palace's study room with a light jog, her eyes hastily scanning the shelves in search for the relevant book. The book in question was one that she

had studied on-and-off in her spare time, having since familiarized herself with the encyclopedia from start to finish. Luckily for her, it didn't take Octavia long to find the book sitting on one of the reachable lower shelves, jutting out partially from the rest of endless books which accompanied it. The owlet immediately pulls the book off the shelf, lying it flat on a nearby table and flipping it wide open.

At last, Via was ready to help. She returns to her phone, putting the call on "speaker" before setting it next to the worn yet sturdy book which had seen many years, judging by its weathered exterior appearance.

She speaks clearly; "Loona, you there?"

"Yeah, I'm still here," Loona confirms without a moment of stagnation.

"Okay," Octavia replies in earnest; "I've got the book open now. Go ahead and explain what you've heard about these things."

Loona huffs through the speaker; *"Right, um… So they're ancient, apparently. Uhh… t-they're sustained through the sacrifice of a person, I think? … They require said sacrifice once every year, or something like that?"*

Octavia was at a loss; "There's, like, a hundred different beings that sound exactly like that. Do you know what they look like?"

"Barely! Fucking dammit, I knew I should've asked what they look like… No, wait! I-I think I do!"

Via leans towards the phone sat upon the desk; "Go on, I'm listening."

"This sinner I just spoke to says that they look like they're made of shadows!" Loona goes on to explain with great detail through the phone; *"I-I think I might have seen one, too! Saw it when I was stranded with Jim up in the living world. We looked down towards the tree line from his house, and there was this freakishly tall, shadowy figure off in the distance. It was very tall and looked like the outline of a human, but not really. Does that make any sense?"*

“I… think I get what you’re saying,” Octavia replies in earnest, flicking through the pages in alphabetical order as she did so; “Hold on, I might know what you’re dealing with…”

The pages seemed almost endless to Via as she continued browsing, every bit of the walls of text jutting out at her in an almost monotonous fashion. Via’s eyes constantly shift as she browses through the extensive list of names and labels, trying her best to match up the description given to her with the contents of the encyclopedia. One thing that the owl princess noted about the description Loona had provided to her was how it gave her an odd sense of deja vu; as if she remembered reading about it before, yet at the time she must’ve paid little attention to it.

Suddenly Via freezes, coming across a name; “Wait! Just found it!”

“You did?” Loona asks, her voice buzzing through the phone.

Octavia reads the name on the one-hundred-and-fifteenth page of the encyclopedia, letting the name sink in before breaking the news to Loona; “Pretty sure I have, yeah. I-It says here you’re dealing with a… a ‘Congregor’.”

“A what now?” Loona asks with confusion, seemingly taken aback by the name.

“A ‘Congregor’,” Octavia repeats, carefully inspecting the information laid out before her; “I’ll give you some background stuff on them. Okay, so… it says here that there isn’t much known about their true origins… um… b-but it’s widely suspected they might originate from down here in hell; or at least an undiscovered and or forgotten part. It also says that their first recorded documentation comes from the human world, from the Romans. … Says that there were some Romans who used to try and make contact with them, and ask for their strengths, according to some obscure Roman writings that were found. Oh! So it turns out it was these discovered writings which dubbed these beings ‘Congregors’.”

“Does it say anything about how they think or act?” Loona asks with fixated interest.

The owl princess reads further into the page, her eyes scanning until they meet with the relevant paragraph.

At once, she begins to read it aloud to the attentive hellhound; “Seems it does. Okay, let’s see… Oh shoot. Buckle yourself up, Loona, this is a long one…”

“...Not much is known about these highly intelligent species, as they are known to be especially obscure and illusive in their actions, making extensive study into their behavioral patterns difficult, but not entirely impossible. From studies which have been published over the centuries, ‘Congregors’ appear to think and act in a highly methodic behavioral pattern. They will not attack unless directly provoked, or will only attack and claim their “host’s” souls if their annual feasting hour is majorly disrupted. Never has a ‘Congregor’ been known to strike in an unprovoked or compulsive manner, resorting to merely stalking those who they take a particular interest towards. It is important to note that if you are stalked by a ‘Congregor’, this does not mean that you are in any immediate danger, unless you have partaken in their “summoning” ritual beforehand…”

“...Destroying a “Congregor Hive” will increase your risk of provoking hostilities between yourself and the ‘Congregors’ themselves. In order to safely destroy a “Congregor Hive” without becoming a possible target, it is crucial that you have something, or someone, that is “Blessed” within your possession, and/or within the immediate vicinity of yourself. Blessed items and people have been known to act as a strong repellent against ‘Congregors’, preventing them from latching onto either yourself or your loved ones.”

An overwhelmed exhale sounded off through the phone; *“Shit. That’s a lot to take in… Wait, hang on! I have something blessed on me!”*

“Do you??” Octavia asks with genuine surprise.

“Yeah!” Loona exclaims in a tone which almost sounded excited and optimistic; *“I-It’s a bullet I got, it’s been blessed! The sinner I interrogated today gave it to me.”*

“Well there you go,” Octavia states; “I’d say you’re in a good position to defend yourself from them.”

“At least I’ve got that going for me!” Loona agrees with heightened optimism; *“Wait a minute… Via, does it say anything about how long I’ve got?”*

Octavia asks for an elaboration; “As in how much time you have left?”

“Exactly! As in, does it say when their “feasting time” is?”

The owl princess squints back down towards the page of extensive words, muttering quietly to herself as she skimmed over each sentence. Before too long, she manages to find the relevant section, proceeding to read it aloud once more.

Via reads the passages aloud and clearly; “The annual feasting hour for a gathering of ‘Congregors’ — also known as their “acquiring period” — has been observed to occur on the fourth Monday of the Sixth Month of the year.”

The phone line went silent for a few seconds, with Loona obviously deep in thought about this crucial detail.

Loona asks another follow-up question to nobody in particular; *“Wait, hang on. What’s the date again? … Oh crap… H-Holy shit!”*

Octavia notices the alarm in Loona’s voice; “What? L-Loona, you okay there??”

“Two days, Via! I-I’ve only got TWO DAYS left!” Loona’s voice booms through the phone, echoing through the vast library!

Via replicates the hellhound’s sense of alarm; “Oh shit, you kidding?!”

Loona responds in kind; *“No, I’m not kidding! Oh hell, I don’t even know how I’m even gonna DO this yet! I’ve got even less time to figure out where that rotten old hag lives!”*

Via became perplexed; “Say what now?”

Loona left this question unanswered; *“T-Thank you so much, Via! ARGH— Goddammit! I-I gotta go!!”*

Click!

The hellhound on the other end of the line abruptly hangs up the phone call, leaving a confused yet concerned Octavia all alone with the dull, monotone buzzing of the dial tone.

Forty-Eight Hours Until The Ritual…

Devising Against Time

Forty-Eight Hours. Two Days…

Forty-Eight Hours. Two Days…

Forty-Eight Hours. Two Days…

How? How in the deepest reaches of hell was she going to do all of what was necessary before the 'feasting hour'? It seemed damn near impossible!

DING!

The creaking doors of the apartment elevator roll open with a metallic groaning sound, revealing the long and musty-scented hallway stretching out into nothingness before the lone hellhound. Without wasting another second, Loona strides with purpose down the hallway, back down towards the relative safety and comfort of her apartment. With every step she took, Loona felt a childlike sense of sanctuary arise within her; as if entering through that doorway and into that all too familiar living room would provide her with solace and refuge, away from the many dangers of the outside world, like a child cowering away from casted shadows. In fact, Loona began to feel as if she was a pitiful and hopelessly lost child, trying her utmost yet futile best to fight against a pursuer who was so much more powerful than herself.

A near perfect comparison to her exact situation was the story which had been told many times over; the tale of a lone and almost feeble warrior, wrestling with all of their might against a towering and colossal giant in spite of the overbearing odds stacked against them. A story of resilience, of resistance, and of hope. But truly, what 'hope' did Loona have, if she had any to begin with? She was just a hellhound at the end of the day. A fair and harrowing point, to be sure. In saying this, it may come to pass that the indomitable power and strength provided by a sense of 'stoicism' would end up deciding fate for her. What that fate would be ultimately was up to her wildest guesses.

Nonetheless, Loona struggled on. She had to.

Thanks to her long arching strides, Loona had arrived in front of her apartment door before she even knew it, prompting the hellhound to slide to an abrupt stop against the cold, hard floor. Loona takes a moment to compose herself before she enters, giving herself a series of slow and steady breaths to alleviate her nerves which were plagued with tension. It takes the anxious hellhound no more than a few seconds to compose herself, allowing for her to breathe easier and to think with a far more rational and collected mindset. Loona would need this newfound level-headedness to do what she had to do — She was going to devise a plan; one which had to be well thought-out, yet simple and streamlined enough to make executing said plan simple enough to start, and to conclude. It had to be perfect, or at least as perfect as Loona was able to make it.

As Loona finds the apartment key on the van's key-chain, she picks up on a muffled noise coming from inside. It was quickly obvious as to what the noise was; the sound of conversation between Blitz and Jim.

"Ya sure you're dialin' the right number?"

"Dammit– of course I am! As if I wouldn't know my own daughter's phone number! GAH! stupid phone!!"

"Hang on, let me try! Hand it over. ... Uhh... Huh. Bugger. It isn't working, is it?"

"Yeah, no shit! RAAGH— For FUCK sakes!! Always knew those mobile data cock jockeys would fuck me over like this! At the right time, too!!"

Loona blinks with confusion, figuring out that the pair of them had been trying to call her. She looks down at her phone before turning it on, only to be slapped in the face with a grand total of up to fifteen missed calls and texts which varied in frequency and in alarm! A quick check of the times these hidden notifications were sent revealed that they had been delivered over a period of two whole hours.

"Loonie, were did u go?? :("

"Ware are u going???"

"Call back and explain watts wrong???"

“Please answer me, sweaty!! Daddy’s getting reelie worr-weed!! :”””((”

A further inspection of her phone revealed that at some point, Loona had accidentally put it on silent mode which canceled out any notifications. She had done such a thing a handful of times before, usually to prevent any disruptive calls whenever she was out at a party, or if she wanted to get away for a while with the company of herself. On almost every occasion that Loona had put her phone on silent, it usually resulted in her coming home, only to find that Blitz had overreacted, fretting about her safety. It wasn’t as if Loona didn’t appreciate her father’s worry; she absolutely did! But the way he always panicked when she didn’t answer had quickly turned obnoxious, if not infuriating. The audible panicked tone in Blitz’s voice widely hinted that this was yet another instance, and frankly, Loona wasn’t in the mood.

“Nnngh, give me a break…” Loona mumbles to herself in frustration, running a hand down her face as she unlocks the door before opening it widely, embracing for—

“***Gasp!*** LOONIE!!”

Loona’s broke out a forced nervous smile; “Y-Yeah, hey–”

THWUMP!!

The hellhound jolts in fright, the imp almost immediately latching onto her in a huge bear hug!

Blitz begins bawling his heart out; “Oh my sweet pumpkin pie!! W-Where did you go?!? I-I– I mean– w-we were worried sick about you! We were about to—”

“OKAY, OKAY, I GET IT!! I’m sorry for running off like that. Just– nngh!! Quit hugging me so tight!” Loona begs, her father’s powerful hug beginning to hurt her waist.

It didn’t take long for Blitz to realize just how tensely he was embracing his daughter. He immediately begins expressing his apologies, releasing his firm embrace and sliding back onto his feet. With the acute pressure released from around her abdomen, Loona catches her breath with a

quick gasp. She fixes her fur up where it had been scuffed from Blitz's tight hug, before sighing abruptly.

Blitz nervously smiles; "Heheh. Sorry about that, Loonie! I–I'm just glad you're safe, is all."

The hellhound makes a dismissive gesture, directed at her father's groveling apology; "Sure, whatever! Just don't do that again."

Jim, who was still wearing his long oilskin coat and dark-gray flat cap, pipes up with a fair question; "So what happened? Why did ya run off?"

Loona froze in place, her face tensing up for a moment. At first, she wasn't sure whether or not to reveal it in fear that it may breach Morger's privacy; especially considering his, to say the least, 'less than desirable' state. On top of this, the thought of having to recall that traumatizing hospital visit which had only occurred no less than two short hours ago was sure to stress her out. However, from what she could tell by the confused looks that both Jim and Blitz were giving her, they weren't going to let up until she provided an answer.

A soft sigh escaped as Loona's expression softened into a sorrowful look. She holds her left forearm as she provides her sincere explanation, her voice soft and full of regret while diverting her eyes away; "I-It's Morger. He's not in a good way…"

Blitz raises his eyebrow, oblivious to this new name; "Who the hell's 'Morger'?"

Jim was quicker to recognize the name; "Who? The bloke with that… massive scar down his cheek??"

Loona looks up towards the human, giving off a somber and silent nod. There was a deep look or concern and remorse glittering in her red eyes.

The human blinks, taken aback by the revelation; "W-What do ya mean he's in a bad way?"

“What does it sound like to you?” Loona asks rhetorically, conveying her words with a great sense of somber; “He’s in the hospital under intensive care, I went and saw him. He looks fucking terrible.”

Jim furrows his brow, at a loss for words. In spite of his bafflement, he asks again; “What happened to him?”

Loona sighs deeply as she shrugs; “We don’t know. Looks like he got beat up pretty bad by someone, or something. He’s been fucked up bad, and we’re not sure if he’ll… if he’ll pull through.”

The human let out a restrained heavy sigh as he took off his hat, proceeding to rub his fingers through his hair as he paced slowly, trying to process the news that he had just received. Blitz meanwhile stood in place, his face holding a look of concern, shock, and confusion all at the same time. While the imp had never heard of this “Morger” friend of Loona’s before, he could tell by the way the hellhound carried herself that this development was incredibly serious. The room was eerily quiet as a grim silence filled the air around them, the trio unsure of what to add to the conversation.

Finally, it was Jim who broke the stagnation; “So what now?”

Loona looks back up towards the human. She stares at him with that same mournful and worrisome look in her eyes, before changing her face into a serious, stoic mien; “… We plan. That’s what we’re doing now.”

Jim seemed perplexed; “Plan what?”

Loona huffs in frustration; “A way out of this horseshit, Jim! What else did you think we’re planning? A birthday party?! Christ on a stick, can everyone just STOP TURNING AGAINST—”

Loona freezes, managing to stop herself mid-sentence as she notices the reaction of her small audience of two. Both the young man and the imp were startled by the sudden ferocity in Loona’s voice, the pair of them staring at the flustered hellhound with their full collective attention locked onto her. The gargantuan stress that Loona found herself under was displayed through her labored, exacerbated breathing; her chest rising and falling after her momentary monstrous outburst as she tried to catch her breath once more.

With a shallow sigh, Loona shuts her eyes with a squeeze, allowing for her composure to return; “Ugh, goddammit… Sorry! Argh— Sorry. I-I’m just tired, and I want all of this to be over! We all do.”

Loona’s audience of two nod in earnest, agreeing with the sentiment wholeheartedly.

Now that everyone was confirmed to be on the same page, Loona continues speaking; “A-As I was saying before I lost my shit, we need a plan, and we need it badly! I don’t think we have much time left to sort this out before the ritual, and if we—”

“Woahwoahwoah, slow down!” Jim interrupts, putting his hands up; “I’m sorry, a ritual? The fuck are ya talking about??”

“Oh that’s right, I haven’t told you…” Loona groans as she starts explaining; “Remember that ‘Jack Foster’ guy I said I was gonna see? I saw him shortly after I left the hospital, literally sped my ass down there! I may have almost hit a few people on the way there, but meh, sucks to be them. He said something about Malloy preferring to do “the killing blow” at certain times, saying that it was because of the black magic shit that he practices which only permits him to kill at certain times or… something like that, I don’t know! So anyway, afterwards I asked Via to see if she had any insight into whatever-the-fuck he was on about, and we got to digging. To cut a long story short… look, Jim, PLEASE don’t panic when I say this, but uhh… yeah, turns out Malloy wants to sacrifice your soul to a bunch of ancient shadowy creatures from who-knows-where.”

…

“...EXCUSE ME?!”

“Fucking dammit, Jim, I told you not to panic!” Loona scolds; “Just listen, okay?? He said that we can destroy it! We just need to find where exactly Malloy does all of his occult junk and all we gotta do is burn it all. It’s not rocket science!”

“Okay, sounds just rosy!” Jim remarks with a hint of growing snark to his tone; “Did he say WHERE this godforsaken thing is or not??”

Loona's muzzle broke out into a wince, her ears folding back; "... N-No, but he—"

"OH THAT'S JUST PERFECT, INNIT?!" Jim cries out from the top of his lungs; "He knows about Victor's black magic hoo-hah, but NOTHING about where it is?! That's awesome, Loona! That's just so wonderf—"

"SHUT UP AND LET ME FINISH!!" The hellhound interrupts in a ferocious, growling voice in a bid to control the devolving situation!

It appeared as if Loona's strict order was taken in all seriousness as Jim ceased his ranting almost instantly.

"Are you done??" Loona sternly asks, glaring at the human with a look which had the sharpness of a thousand daggers. Jim says nothing, resorting to shutting his mouth and standing attentively and daring not to utter another pessimistic remark. Loona grunts, convinced that Jim was, indeed, done; "Good! As I was saying before you decided to be all snarky with me, he said there's this old crone who knows exactly where it is. Guess I gotta go and beat the truth outta her, or something."

"Which old woman, what's her name?" Jim asks intently, trying to figure out if the task of interrogating some old woman would get them anywhere.

"Hmph! Why does it matter?" Loona proceeds to ask with a light scoff, placing one hand on her hip as she waits for an adequate answer.

The young bushman shrugs; "I don't know, what if it's the wrong woman and he's taking the piss?"

Just before she could let out a flat rebuke of this notion, Loona froze in place, considering that it was more or less a good point. What if Jack Foster was taking the proverbial "piss", and was purposefully misleading her in a direction which would ultimately seal her or Jim's untimely fate? The bastard WAS associated with Malloy, after all! It was a cunning, near fool-proof plan; tell his sob story to some strange hellhound who suddenly comes around asking about his boss' past before leading her off into a wild goose chase to find some stupid, geriatric old bag who wasn't worth anyone's time! How could've she been so stupid?!

But wait! No… If Jack Foster was actually wanting to legitimately trick her… why would he go out of his way to give her that blessed bullet? It wasn't as if blessed rounds of ammunition were an everyday gift, either. Maybe the sinner was actually genuine with his intentions? Besides, what did he have to lose anymore? He was, as he put it himself, "a broken man" with nothing else going for him.

Loona raises her brow with skepticism to the notion, proceeding to unravel a small object clasped in her right hand; "If he wanted to do that, he wouldn't have given me this! Look!"

The hellhound opens her hand to reveal the object in question; the blessed bullet, still glimmering that same silvery-white light which decorated the bullet itself and the casing with mesmerizing patterns. Jim's eyes widened with astonishment, examining the singular near hypnotizing round of ammunition resting loosely in Loona's open palm.

Blitz's reaction was far more sporadic – more so along the lines of 'panicky'; "WH– HOLY FUCKING SHIT!!! Drop that cursed thing right NOW young lady!!"

Loona raises her hands to calm her panicking father down; "Blitz wait, give it a rest! It's not even hurting me, I'm—"

Unfortunately Blitz had gone off on an unstoppable tangent; "Are you insane, pumpkin?!? One little insignificant move and that… THING will kill you!! Ouuuhhhh— I swear! If anything happens to you because of that death-trap, I-I'll find that cum-guzzler who gave it to you and I'll RIP HIS DAMN THRO—…"

Luckily for everyone's sanity and his own, the mentally spiraling imp was able to catch himself before he could get any worse, pausing in the middle of his sentence and looking back towards his daughter who was giving him an unimpressed look, her arms folded and her left foot tapping impatiently. Blitz stares at his daughter in awkward silence, looking away for a moment before staring back once again.

The imp stutters; "Wait, am I overrreacti—"

"Uh-Huh. Yeah, no shit you are." Loona flatly states with a groan, clearly not impressed with her father's hyperreactive impulses. She leaves no time to spare as she proceeds to showcase the singular bullet, holding it by the casing; "As I was saying, DAD. … You two know what this is? It's a blessed bullet. After I was done questioning Jack, he handed this over to me. He said that I

could have it, that it would protect me if I needed it. If he really wanted to fuck around with me, he wouldn't have given me literally one of the most valuable and rarest things in hell!"

Jim holds his hand out in a nonverbal request to inspect the rare item for himself, with Loona abiding by the request by gently handing it to him, careful not to drop it. The human inspects it carefully, examining every part of the otherworldly patterns strewn about the shiny brass casings. He turns it around in between his fingers, closing one eye to see if he could find the exact caliber of this truly remarkable round to no avail. In fact, there were no etched-in details on the casing at all; not even on the base of the casing where it usually would be placed on a traditional bullet.

The young bushman grunts, blinking in confusion as he hands it back; "Right so, did he tell ya the caliber of it? I can't see any measurements."

Loona let off a series of confused blinks, looking down towards the bullet to have a look for herself. Sure enough, as Jim had claimed, there was indeed no indication of the exact caliber, the base of the round instead occupied with more of those strange blessed silvery patterns. Great. Now it was up to a guess as to what the true caliber could be. This proved to sour Loona's mood a little, though she didn't give up hope. There must be a weapon which would be compatible with this singular round of ammunition; there had to be! But where? And what?

Suddenly, an epiphany! Loona looks back down at the round for a closer inspection, squinting her eyes at the distinct shape of the casing before looking back up towards Jim with a question; "Wait a second… Jim, do you think your rifle would be able to take this?"

Jim raised his brow; "What, the Lee Enfield? Only one way to find out, I suppose. But that's the problem, Loona, it's back at home!"

"Then it's a good thing we're going back up," Loona suddenly let slip, revealing a part of the plan which was still in its infancy.

"You're going back up there?!?" Blitz loudly interjects, surprised by this all-so-sudden development; "And WHY haven't you told me this, young lady??"

The hellhound groans; "I WAS, but everyone wants to keep interrupting me! Can we move on to planning a way out of this mess now, or do we want to keep staring at this piece-of-shit bullet for eternity??"

“Well go on then, we’re all ears!” Jim insists with a waving gesture for Loona to explain.

An abrupt sigh left Loona’s maw as she rubs her forehead from a light tension headache; “Okay, thank you! Now, both of you listen up…”

The prominent Australian sun provided a warm comfort over the countryside landscape below which was under the spell of a cold snap, its radiant hue casting its warmth across the picturesque valley scene below. A small convoy consisting of three cars sped their way on the weather-beaten asphalt road towards that same-old homestead; the very same timber homestead which had been subject to nearly a week of intense investigation. By any measure, this convoy was certainly out of the ordinary, consisting of a Police Car leading the convoy, a black Four-Wheeled-Drive in the middle, and a silver sedan trailing behind. It didn’t take long for this convoy to begin slowing down before simultaneously indicating left, pulling into the entrance of the aforementioned property.

In almost perfect unison, the cars made contact with the gravel driveway, the sound of gravel being crushed under the sudden weight filling the air with light, sporadic crackling. All three vehicles slowed to a crawl as they approached the front of the house, taking their parking positions and slowing to a complete stop. The engines are cut off in almost complete unison as the passengers step out into the chilly outside world. Among the first to step out was the Private Investigator, Vasily Antonov, who had been driving his black four-wheeled-drive with himself as its lone occupant. The aging yet stoic Vasily threw on his beige overcoat, shoving his arms through the sleeves as he adjusted it by the collar, buttoning it up for extra warmth before adorning a black trilby upon his head. Stepping out of the white-and-blue police car in front of him were the same familiar faces which he had grown used to seeing over the past week; Senior Constable for Morrisvale, Trevor Pearson, and Senior Constable for Kilgowie, Clyde Barnes.

Joining the trio of hardened arms of law and order, driving the silver sedan which had been trailing behind them, was the reason for this out of the ordinary trip; a priest with a long white beard, dressed in a black cassock which draped over his hands. The aged man was accompanied by two other individuals dressed in semi-formal clothing, one of them handling a large bowl full of water, complete with a brush with a beige wooden handle attached to fine, long strands of bounded white bristles.

Both Trevor Pearson and Clyde Barnes watch as Vasily Antonov ignores their presence, instead turning his back to them and approaching the priest which they had been leading as part of their most unusual entourage. Almost immediately, the private investigator got to talking with the priest, speaking to him in a language which both Senior Constables could barely understand. Judging from

the hand gestures alone, it seemed certain that the conversation was about the house which stood before them, looming over all of them like a stagnant monolith; a stark reminder of what had happened there to end up requiring a priest to come and bless it.

After concluding their conversation spoken in his language, Vasily returns to the two policemen with his hands in his overcoats pockets for extra warmth. Upon approaching them, he starts speaking in a solemn tone; “Father Aleksandr will not take long. It will be just a thorough general blessing of the interior.”

Clyde Barnes scratches the side of his face from an itch as he asks; “And how long will that take?”

“At most? Up to twenty minutes,” Vasily kindly explains, clearing his throat from a momentary scratchy throat, most likely from the icy wind which had blown through mere seconds before; “I implore that you remain respectful and patient throughout this, Mr. Barnes. Father Aleksandr helped me in my darkest hour, and he will most certainly help us here, I assure you both.”

“No worries…” Clyde flatly agrees, cracking his fingers before letting his arms swing loosely.

“Don’t worry about Clyde here, Mr. Antonov,” Trevor Pearson advises; “He’s just a sore old bugger like the rest of us. He just doesn’t like doing much heavy lifting anymore, let alone waiting around.”

Regardless of Trevor’s insistence to ignore his counterpart’s thinly-veiled rudeness, Vasily grunts; “Nevermind that. Just keep a watch out for any trespassers and we shall be fine.”

With this direction now put in place, Vasily wanders towards the veranda where the priest now stood in front of the entrance. The green front door stood wide open, the hallway illuminated by the switched-on interior lights. After a moment of silence, the priest begins to work, stepping into the house at a snail's pace as he dabbed the bristles into the full bowl of water he held. With the brush now soaked in water, the priest begins sprinkling the hallway by flinging the drenched bristles with a flick of his wrist, reciting a monotone and centuries old chant in his own language as he did so, repeating this motion over and over as he walks further into the depths of the abode.

As the priest’s booming and prominent deep voice ventures further into the house, being muffled by the hardwood timber walls, Clyde Barnes decides to make a comment to his direct counterpart; “This is ridiculous, Trev’. It bloody well is…”

Trevor let out a disgruntled sigh, the coldness of the air around him displayed faintly by his breath; “Who are you to say what’s bull and what’s not, Clyde?”

“Someone who’s involved in a ruddy missing person’s case,” Clyde rebukes in a hushed voice so the private investigator wouldn’t hear him; “Come off it, you know exactly what I mean! We’ve been searching for Mr. Steele for practically a week now, and we’ve found zilch! What the hell are we doing standin’ around and watchin’ some old bloke blessing a house? This isn’t gonna help find that young bloke any quicker. If anything, this is delayin’ us…”

Trevor nods slowly; “I get your frustration. I’m approaching the end of my rope, too. But look, it’s not as if we don’t have any hope at all. What about that young bloke Winslow brought in for questioning this morning?”

Clyde snorts; “Adrian? That little shitstain? Mate, I saw him; there’s nothing going on behind those eyes! As if he’d tell us anything about where Mr. Steele is. Probably doesn’t even know his arse from his elbow.”

“He’s connected to the crime scene though, isn’t he?” Trevor counters the pessimistic doubt, trying to remain optimistic despite the lack of proper results so far; “His DNA was found on those bullet casings. Even if he doesn’t end up saying much, he could still lead us somewhere. It’s not like we got much choice on who to question, yanno?”

Although he felt compelled to protest further, Clyde resisted against the temptation to do so, instead resorting to nodding silently in agreement. The hushed private conversation petered off as the quiet sounds of the rolling hills and bushland took hold once more. From deep within the house, albeit muffled, the sound of the priest’s blessing of the house continues without interruption, an almost haunting reminder to everyone present as to why they were there. If it turned out that perhaps the subject of the missing person’s case was in fact dead, the blessing of this lonely homestead might as well be a funeral — perhaps even a service to help his soul rest.

Before the silence could continue for any longer, Trevor clears his throat, deciding to break the near monotonous silence; “I had a dream a few nights ago.”

Clyde let out a light chuckle; “We all have dreams, Trev’.”

Trevor looks out into the surrounding trancing landscape, admiring the view as he spoke; “Yeah, but this one was different. … I can’t shake off thinking about it, ya know?”

“What was it about, hey?” Clyde asks, noticing that his counterpart had a lightly conflicted look on his brow.

It took a moment for the Senior Constable to think on what he was about to say, his eyes shifting in thought. Finally, he began recalling; “Had a dream that I was sittin’ out in my front garden, just lookin’ out into the street. You know how around this time of year, we get that rollin’ morning fog? I dreamt that it was like that, just full of that fog; but it seemed thicker than it had any right to be. I’m talkin’ so thick that I couldn’t see more than five feet in front of me. So anyway, I’m looking into this gray nothingness, right? And I start to see something approach me. Wanna know what it looked like?”

Clyde shrugs with his hands tucked into his trouser pockets; “Go on.”

Trevor continues; “It looked like… It looked like the silhouette of this massive wolf. I’m talking huge, like bigger than I’ve ever seen before! Weird thing about it was that it was standing completely upright on its hind legs, standing at around six feet if I had to guess, just walking casually towards me. Took a closer look and I saw that it looked to have human arms, yanno? It had this long mane of hair, too… it just looked so scarily human, but not at the same time.”

“Did you get to see its features?” Clyde inquires, somewhat intrigued by this retelling of what sounded like a very bizarre dream.

Trevor shook his head; “Nah, not at all! All I saw was its silhouette, just outlined as a figure in the fog.”

“Huh… well that’s buggered…” Clyde mumbles, diverting his eyes away to find where Vasily Antonov had ended up, the private investigator having since moved from his post by the veranda’s entrance steps. Looking around his immediate surroundings, Clyde ends up finding Vasily standing by his four-wheeled-drive, his back pressed against the side of his vehicle with his phone pressed up against his ear. It was immediately apparent that Vasily was speaking to someone, and by the way he held his wrinkled, ever-aging brow, it seemed most important.

This provoked interest to arise within the Senior Constable, telling his Morrisvale counterpart that he wouldn’t be a moment before waltzing his way down the gravel pathway towards the private

investigator. As he approached, Clyde began to pick up on individual snippets of what sounded to be an intense conversation, questions such as “are you sure that’s him?” and “do we know where she is now?” being thrown around periodically. Finally the conversation ends, with Vasily saying his farewells before hanging up the call. He brings the phone down from his ear, looking down at what Clyde guessed was a message he had been sent with a list of some kind. After skimming over the list, Vasily looks up from his phone and towards the Senior Constable standing before him, shooting the police officer a serious look.

Clyde breaks the silence between them; “What was that about?”

“… We have a new suspect.”

Scrunched-up papers, discarded used pens, and even more bundles of planning-related trash. It was all piling up in its own designated spot in the corner of the living room as the minutes ticked by at a terribly slow pace. For the past hour as afternoon turned into evening, Loona and Jim — with some minimal constructive help from Blitz — had been tediously planning their course of action for when they returned to the human world. The plan which had been constructed so far was this; Loona and Jim would depart the day prior to the ‘feasting hour’, which would give them roughly thirty-six hours to figure out where Malloy’s ritual ground was, and thus destroy it in a spell of blazing fire, cleansing it from the earth to which it stood. Finding the exact location to end Malloy’s persistent ‘madness’ once and for all was one battle; acquiring the logistics for such a high stakes operation was an entirely different challenge to conquer.

Loona furrowed her brow in deep thought as she paced aimlessly, trying her best to figure out how exactly they were going to achieve their goals as flawlessly as possible. Out of all the situations that she had faced in the past, Loona felt that this upcoming mission was going to be one of, if not the most challenging and perilous missions she had ever faced in her life. So much was at stake and there was so much to lose! If she fucked this up by even the smallest of slip-ups, she could kiss her life and her friends goodbye! Loona had to make herself as ready as she possibly could be; for her own sake, and for Jim’s. … But time was running out, and the clock was ticking.

“You done with that map yet??” Loona asks impatiently, stopping to look at Jim; the human was hyper-fixated on the piece of paper lying flat before him on the table, a pencil in his left hand which he used to sketch.

“Yeah yeah, almost done. Just a few more minutes,” Jim answers half-heartedly, his attention focused entirely on the map which was taking shape.

Loona ends up giving in to her impatience, walking over to Jim and glancing down at the table over his shoulder, observing the carefully crafted map which was being drawn before her eyes. The hellhound blinks in mild surprise, the sheer quality of the developing map catching her off guard; everything from the individually named roads and the outlines of each building jutting out at her from the page, satisfying her eye for detail. Of course, Loona knew that Jim was a carpenter and hunter who was keen with a hammer or rifle respectively, but never did she expect him to be an above average artist.

Alas, Loona couldn't help but comment on the sketch; "Woah. Jim, that's… that's actually not half bad. How the hell are you doing that?"

Jim continues focusing on his cartography, replying to the hellhound with a proud smirk; "Been teaching myself in my downtime. I've done a heap of other maps at home, they're beside my bed in the nightstand. Don't mean to make a big note for myself, but I've gotten better than I used to be."

Loona nods slowly, still acting oddly curious; "No kidding. So this map's accurate to your hometown, right?"

"That's why I'm taking my time," Jim explains as he lines up a ruler on the sheet of paper, drawing a faint line which measures roughly ten centimeters long; "Gotta make sure that everything I've drawn here corresponds with reality. I'm almost done anyway; just gotta complete the main road and some other small labels, then I'm done."

Loona grunts in acknowledgment of this information, still not understanding how exactly this apparent artist was doing this all from his memory. She pats him on the shoulder; "Keep it up dude, you're doing good. Me? I've got more plotting to do — something which I am complete trash at but hey, sucks to be me."

"What's there to think about, sweetie? Just do what I would; go all in, hope for the best!" Blitz interjects from the couch with his infinite wisdom. For the past hour, Loona had assigned her father to thoroughly clean his rifle, preparing it for her to borrow when she returned to the human world in case she needed it. A menial task to be sure, and one which Loona assigned to Blitz not because it was too important, but because she didn't trust him with anything else, at least for now.

Loona appeared baffled by this suggestion; "That has got to be THE densest thing I've ever heard from you! Do you WANT me to die??"

Blitz seemed unphased, though well meaning; “That’s what you did when you saved Mox and I’s asses from those dickweed agents, didn’t you? Remember what you did there and do the same thing with this!”

“We only got your sorry ass out of there because I was being, oh I dunno, careful!” Loona forthrightly corrected; “You know, methodical! Vigilant? Tactical? Do any of those words mean anything to you??”

Blitz scoffs; “Careful, schmareful! What’s being careful done for anyone?? Moxxie’s careful, and look at him! Baby-dick’s even scared of his own shadow!”

“Well I’m not Moxxie, now am I? Don’t you dare compare me to that shithead!” Loona scowls in a mixture of stress and annoyance; “Can you shut it for a minute? I’m trying to think here! If I need your input, I’ll tell you.”

That’s when Loona gets back to pacing aimlessly around the room, using all of her brain power to figure out a proper method of approach. She had all the pieces to formulate a plan, now all that was needed was how she was going to achieve them; would she be inconspicuous about it, or was there a need to be aggressive? … Just as she was about to lose hope in devising a plan herself, her brain at last started figuring it all out like clockwork! Loona’s eyes widened with cautious optimism as she froze in place, every idea coming at her practically all at once!

This was Loona’s plan:

The plan would include three people; herself, Jim (obviously), and Blitz. Millie and Moxxie were out of the question, but may need to be called for help if things went to complete and utter shit. Stolas might be of help if absolutely necessary in accordance with his promise to put them all under his ‘protection’, though this too may be impossible due to his apparently debilitating health.

Blitz would be tasked with two things; being Loona and Jim’s primary source of back-up if needed, and handling the Grimoire, keeping it back in hell to alleviate the risk of it being lost in case of disaster. This of course meant that once Loona and Jim were up there, they wouldn’t be able to return on their own accord. Effectively, herself and Jim would be on their own unless they called for assistance.

Once they were up in the human world, Loona and Jim would set up a hidden camp somewhere on the outskirts of town, somewhere up in the foothills where the woods were thickest, though high enough so they could have a general overview of the town. This of course meant that they would need camping gear, but not too much except the essentials; some food, two tents, a source of light for when it got dark, so on and so forth. After the camp is set up and logistics sorted, Loona and Jim would split up for their two main objectives; Jim would be tasked with returning to his house to retrieve his rifle and ammunition (which would be their means of defense), and Loona would head into town and start asking about Harriette Edgecliffe's whereabouts. Once Loona finds that fabled old woman, she would ask her about Malloy and ultimately about his ritual site, using any means necessary to get said information out of her — violently, if she had to. If their respective tasks went smoothly, Loona and Jim would meet back up at camp and settle themselves in for the night, the remainder of the day being spent preparing themselves to end this nightmare once and for all.

Did this plan have its flaws? Absolutely, but time wasn't necessarily on Loona's side, forcing her to accept the plan in her mind as is. A plan with many potential flaws, but a sufficient plan nonetheless; she had to start somewhere, after all. If Loona needed to make compromises at some point in the plan, then so be it! She just wanted all of this to be over and done with.

"Right! Finally done for ya, Loona." Jim notifies Loona as he rests the pencil on the table before him, raising the map in his hands and checking it all carefully.

Loona snaps out of her thoughtful trance with the plan firmly embedded in her mind, raising her head up towards Jim; "Ugh, finally! Took you long enough. Here, let's take a look at it."

Jim gladly hands the extensively detailed map over to Loona, the hellhound grabbing it out of his hands and analyzing it carefully. The map before her was practically flawless, with every building and street which made up the town visible right before her eyes. It was certainly impressive, and would no doubt prove to be of great value to her once she was up in the human world. She nods intently, a satisfied smile spreading across her muzzle as she pats Jim firmly on the shoulder, affectionately congratulating him for his effort. A minor tension headache pains Loona for just a second, causing her to wince — She had been thinking hard non-stop for the past hour or so, after all. This was cause for Loona to desire a quick breather, informing both Jim and Blitz that she would be outside for "just a minute" before making her way towards the door, opening it before stepping outside.

Soon as the door to the apartment closed behind her, Loona was submerged in complete silence, the only sound being produced was the faint humming of the hallway's ceiling lights. To the hellhound's pleasure, it seemed as if she was completely alone, left to the company of herself, and herself only. She saw this as a perfect opportunity to have a smoke, plucking out a cigarette she bought along with her and a lighter which she kept in the back pocket of her shorts. Loona sticks the filter-end of the cigarette in her mouth, letting it hang loosely as she ignites the lighter in her right hand. Just before she could light the cigarette, Loona freezes, having seen something pressed

up against the wall just outside of her peripheral vision to her right. Out of curiosity, she looks down to see what exactly it was.

It was a long wooden crate, standing upright at around four feet in height; a padlock threaded through a steel while which bound the lid to the crate itself. There was something stuck to the lid of this mysterious crate; a letter full of writing, as well as a key stuck to the bottom of it with some tape. Concerningly enough, there appeared to be a streak of putrid black blood splattered across the bottom of the page, looking as if it had been smeared on by a pair of crooked fingers. Written just above the page was a title:

"To The Hellhound"

Loona blinks with confusion, already having reservations about the sudden appearance of this package addressed to "the hellhound", obviously referring to herself. Now that she had spotted it, a sense of morbid curiosity arose within her mind, a curious part of her wondering what exactly was contained within. A part of her wondered if this was some sort of sick, twisted prank that some douchebag was trying to play on her. Another more morbid and paranoid side to Loona elaborated on this thought, wondering if this 'box' was in fact a coffin with a corpse taking up the space inside, ready for the unsuspecting hellhound to open the lid so it could fall out and crash into a rotten mess at her feet!

Guess there was only one way to find out…

After a moment's more of cautious hesitation, Loona peels the open letter off the lid and holds it upright so she could read it in full, all the while evading her fingers away from the blood splatter.

The letter read as follows:

"To the hellhound who resides in the apartment adjacent.

If you are reading this, please assume that I am dead. You might have forgotten who I am already as I am nothing of too much importance, but do know that we did meet. You were sent by Francis Tyler to ask me about Victor Malloy, and I told you all that I know, as well as handing you that blessed brass bullet which I hope beyond hope is still in your possession — that is if you know what's good for you. Do not bother asking yourself how I managed to find your address, that's not important. What is important is what I have written below.

Unfortunately I neglected to mention the exact caliber of the blessed bullet I gave you. The bullet in question measures up to a caliber of 7.92mm approximately, and is compatible with only a select few weapons. Provided within the weapons storage crate before you is one of those compatible firearms — A Mauser Gewehr 98, as well as my last two clips of ammunition. This is the exact same rifle which I shot at you with, and is one which I managed to smuggle in from Earth. If you are wondering as to why I have handed over my beloved pride and joy over to you, as well as my only means to defend myself, it is because I no longer have a use for it.

To try and defend myself against what is coming for me is ultimately futile, for what is there to defend? A man, twisted by his own grave mortal sins into something that even he himself can no longer recognize, his soul the property of ancient beings beyond his own comprehension? There is nothing of me left to defend, I am truly wretched. As I write, I feel my form failing on me; warping and decaying into something much weaker. Those ancient forces I spoke of are coming for me. That experiment that Vick performed on my corpse after he executed me in cold blood? He has doomed me to this fate. Soon, my soul will be taken over by those forces, and I no longer will be myself, but instead a crude mockery. Giving you a means to defend yourself and your mate is my last good deed, but I wouldn't call it a redemption.

Please, if you know what is good for you, you will use this rifle and these bullets to defend yourself when you confront that bastard Vick and his fellow wretched men. I am sure they will be no match for you. But be warned; when you read this, you will only have 48 hours left to defeat this thing and banish it back to the depths of where it came from.

Best of luck to you, for you will most certainly need it.

— J. F."

Forty-Four Hours Until The Ritual…

Ascent

All eyes were unwaveringly fixated on the vintage rifle resting within Loona's hands, gawking at it as if it was the most interesting thing in all of existence. There was something so dumbfoundingly captivating about the weapon which managed to capture both Jim and Blitz's full interest, albeit for different reasons. Jim's reasoning for taking a particular interest in the antique firearm was the historical aspect behind it; after all, the young bushman was the proud owner of a vintage longarm himself in the form of his Lee Enfield Mk. III, so the sight of another very similar weapon — in the form of this Mauser Gewehr 98 — caught his full attention immediately, similar to a dog to the sight of an appetizing bone. Blitz's reasoning for his interest, however, was far less nuanced and that bit more 'simple-minded'. In direct contrast to the human's more nuanced way of thinking, the imp's hot-headed and borderline vengeful mind gravitating to the thought of blowing the head off some unsuspecting evil schmuck — go figure.

Compared to her small audience of two, Loona's own thoughts on the gifted rifle clasped firmly in her hands was rather different. In fact, the hellhound began to hold the firearm to a very high regard, practically becoming attached to it as if it was a prized, one-of-its-kind jewel. However, unlike a jewel which is brittle and delicate, the tried and true longarm felt formidable and almost cathartic in her grasp, as if it held a force of nature which couldn't be matched. Loona couldn't help but imagine with an almost childlike wonder the brutish punch this weapon of destruction contained; how it could shatter the morale of anyone who was unlucky enough to stand in its unforgiving way. Furthermore, Loona imagined in a vengeful sense of wonder about the unstoppable force of nature she could become once she was forced to put herself and this weapon to the test in that final decisive hour. If anything, Loona felt powerful.

"Christ. Fancy leaving something like that out there," Jim comments with wonder, analyzing each component with keen eyes, watching out for any telltale signs of wear and tear which could hinder its operational effectiveness; "Anything else in that gun case?"

Loona shrugs; "Other than the ammo? Hell if I know. I haven't had a good look yet."

"Mind if I look?" Jim asks, his question being answered with a nonchalant "I'm not stopping you" from Loona.

The young man takes the initiative and walks over to the long wooden crate which lay upright on the floor by the entrance. He flips the considerably weighty lid open, the hinges flipping open with a light 'creak' in a testament to their age and wear. Light once more is casted into the interior of the four-foot wooden crate, revealing the dark foam padding which completely covered the exterior. The rough outline of a rifle-like shape signified the exact spot of where Loona's new rifle would sit, as well as a few other indents for the installation of accessories and ammunition. As outlined in

the letter which came attached to the lid, resting off to the top-right corner of the storage crate were two full clips of ammunition, primed and ready for Loona's disposal. In another cut-out to the bottom left of the foam padding was some cleaning oil and brushes for general maintenance of the weapon. What did take Jim by mild surprise, however, was the long, sharp object resting in a cut-out to the bottom-right; a long and shiny bayonet.

Jim let off a grin; "Bloody hell, Loona, he certainly hasn't left you lacking! He's kitted that bastard out, there's even a bayonet in here!"

Loona turns her attention to the gun case behind her in mild interest, raising one eyebrow; "You're kidding? Fuck, it's like he's sending me off to war."

"Hah! He might as well be, considering what we're up against," Jim remarks in an attempt at dry humor. He reaches down for the pristinely maintained bayonet and picks it up by the handle, bringing it up for a closer examination, taking note of how the grip seemed to be made of fine wide-grain wood.

Blitz interjected his own take on the matter, looking up at his daughter with adoring eyes and clasped hands; "Aww, daddy's so proud of you, Loonie! Look at you moving up in the world, owning your own gun and everything!"

Loona couldn't help but roll her eyes; "Yeah, yeah, whatever. Let's just hope it isn't a heap of junk and fails on me, then I'll be in deep shit." The imp continues glaring up at his daughter in an almost pleading way, causing Loona some confusion; "…What's that look for?"

"May I have a hold of it, sweetie? Pretty pleeease~??" Blitz asks in a babyish tone to his voice, sounding more like a child pleading for candy than a grown-ass adult in his thirties.

"…Fine," Loona allows, slightly hesitant to hand the rifle over to the imp in case he damages it in some way; "Just be careful with it. You break anything on it, I'm kicking your ass."

It appeared as though Blitz took this stern warning from his daughter to heart as he grabbed the rifle carefully with both hands, making sure to maintain his grip on the stock and refraining from touching any of the moving parts. With a keen and attentive eye, the imp examines every inch of the rifle, his concentration unwavering. When push came to shove, Blitz could be a professional; especially when it came to his expertise in firearms, as was clearly on display in this instance. The imp raises the rifle up to his shoulder with a little difficulty, taking note of just how long it was

relative to his height. After this moment of struggle, Blitz manages to position the gun as if he was preparing to fire, his eyes lined up with the iron-sights towards something behind Loona, a cocky grin opening up across his face. For a few brief seconds, Loona was oblivious as to what exactly Blitz was aiming at to make him smirk in such an awfully toothy fashion, until she turns around to find Jim, still invested in the contents of the gun crate, in the rifle's direct line of sight.

Loona reacts appropriately; "OH PISS ON A DICK, BLITZ!!" She screams in a sudden outburst of anger, immediately snatching the gun out of the imp's clutches to defuse the disaster waiting to happen! While holding the gun firmly by the stock in one hand, Loona begins scolding with a jabbing finger and a look of bloody murder in her stabbing eyes; "Quit fucking around, that isn't funny!"

To Loona's fuming annoyance, Blitz let out another shit-eating grin; "Oh relax, Loonie, I'm kidding! As if I'm going to shoot Jim-Boy over there. It's not even loaded!"

"Don't fret, Loona, I knew he was aiming it at me," Jim nonchalantly admits to Loona's mild surprise; "Blitz, if you do that again, I'm shoving this bayonet I got here right up your little red arse. Either that, or, heh—, I'll let Loona do the honors."

This provoked a snorting, half-suppressed chuckle from Loona, to Blitz's utmost annoyance. It seems that even after the agreement to be "cooperative" with Loona and Jim to get themselves out of this difficult situation, the prideful imp still couldn't swallow his ego. Old habits die hard. After acting out a provocative and scowling gesture behind Jim's back, Blitz returns to the subject of the rifle he was holding moments before; "Anyway, Loonie, that festy sinner certainly hasn't given you hot garbage, I gotta say!"

In tandem with her father, Loona's mind shifts back to the condition of the rifle as well. She scoffs; "Psh! Didn't know I needed to pass it through the "Blitz Seal of Approval" test, but good to know."

Blitz beams proudly; "Well daddy has to check your guns before you go off using them! I can imagine you now, slaughtering all of those dick jockeys and ripping their cum-guzzling heads off!! Ohoho! If only I could be right there to watch you DO IT!!"

"But you won't," Loona flatly states; "I need you here to protect the grimoire, we literally talked about this an hour ago! By the way, you DO remember the plan, right?"

“Yeah, yeah, of course I know the plan, Loonie! I gotta sit and wait back here and guard the grimoire. Oh! A-And I’ll come as backup if you need it! Don’t worry, daddy’s got it all covered!” Blitz recites the plan in a slightly blase tone which he really couldn’t help; at least to Loona’s knowledge.

Loona let off a yawn as she rubs her eyes, minuscule tears forming on the corners; “Mmm. Okay, great. …Nnngh— Fuck, what time is it..?” She drearily asks herself, looking up at the clock on the wall to discover that the night had only just begun. In spite of this, Loona did feel exceptionally exhausted, considering the rather full and stressful day which she had endured, bouncing around from Sloth and then straight back to Pride, all the while trying to figure out a way to at last confront the threat she faced once and for all. A great many things were eventuating at a much faster rate than what Loona had anticipated; perhaps she had gotten too complacent throughout this entire emotionally taxing journey? It didn’t matter, as she was in the present, and there were still questions which needed answers; reflecting and regrets be damned!

As she rubs the back of her neck in an exhausted fashion, Loona tiredly announces her proposal; “Hrrm… You know, I think I’m gonna… uuuahh!… c-call it a night. Got a huge fucking day tomorrow, I think we should all just get some sleep.”

“Sounds good,” Jim obliges as he stood back up from the crate, closing the lid carefully after returning the bayonet back to its rightful place; “What time should we head off tomorrow?”

“As soon as we wake up, I guess,” Loona states; “We really don’t have much time to kill. As soon as we get our shit together, we head up.”

“I’ll get those tents and shit ready for you, Loonie,” Blitz announces in a genuinely helpful gesture, before making a beeline straight towards the bathroom where a storage compartment sat, containing the items which Loona needed for her expedition.

Loona let out a soft smile of appreciation through her fatigue, mumbling a quiet “thanks” before cutting herself off with another sudden obnoxious yawn. As Loona prepares herself for the evening by heading to the kitchen and grabbing herself a glass of water for a quick drink, the reality of what she was about to do the very next day began to settle in. Within the next eight or so hours, Loona and Jim would be quite literally in a fight for their very lives where the stakes were so incredibly high and all bets were off — perhaps even more so than they already were. A chill runs through Loona’s spine as she considers all this, making her way over to the cabinet and fetching herself a glass before making her way over to the kitchen sink. She holds the glass under the tap and cranks the faucet gently open, allowing for the glass to fill up with a light steady flow of cool refreshing water. Once the glass was completely full, Loona closes the faucet before drinking her serving of water to quench that all-too familiar before-bed thirst.

Just as Loona swallows the last drops of her water, Jim's voice quietly sounds off to her right where the young man stood casually, his hands tucked into his brown oilskin coat; "So how are you feeling?"

Loona let off a dry smirk; "Heh. I should be asking you that, you know? I don't know, dude, I'm… Agh, I'm nervous."

A somber, understanding smile forms on Jim's face as he nods; "I am, too. Anyone else would be. … I-I think we'll pull through, though. We just gotta keep going. Stoicism is key, it's what helped us win two wars. Battling against the odds, and, well… heheh… and smiling all the way through it."

There was a passing moment of silence which seemed to stretch on far longer than it actually was, with Loona balling one hand into a fist as it rested against the kitchen counter. She bows her head with a pensive look about her expression, obviously pondering upon Jim's statement with serious consideration. The silence didn't last long as Loona unraveled her fist, looking back up from the kitchen counter and towards Jim. She examines the human standing off to her right intently before speaking her mind; "You wanna know something, Jim? You confuse the fuck outta me, you really do. I-I'm not saying that like it's a bad thing. You're just hard to figure out, that's all."

Jim let off a grin; "Yeah? Why's that, chief?"

Loona dryly chuckles; "'Why's that', he asks… Dude. Come on, you know exactly why. Think about it. Who in their right mind would want to willingly be friends with a bitchy hellhound like me? Definitely not someone normal."

The human's grin grew ever wider, shaking his head slowly; "Who said I was ever normal? I've always been a bit nuts."

"Hmph. That's to say the least," Loona remarks right back with a hint of light-hearted mockery. She continues; "But even though you're very weird and hard to figure out, you're not half bad to have around. You're one of the better ones."

"Ah yeah?"

Loona nods genuinely with a soft smile before letting out her umpteenth obnoxious yawn for the evening, her eyelids becoming heavier and heavier by the minute as the desire for sleep crept up ever further. There was no doubt left in the hellhound's mind that she was just about ready to collapse where she stood and fall into a deep sleep, a comforting feeling of numbness usually associated with the onset of a nap beginning to creep through her entire body. That's when she calls it, albeit with another more polite yawn; "...Uuuuargh!… Nngh, w-we should finally call it a night. Gotta be awake in time tomorrow."

"Fine by me," Jim obliges as he lets out a yawn of his own, taking the flat cap off his head in order to scratch his scalp, his dark brown hair being disturbed by his fingers.

The few short steps made towards the bedroom door felt more to Loona like a hundred yards, the cause of this attributed to a mixture of fatigue and the lingering apprehensive anxiety she had for what was to come. In eight short hours, the hellhound would soon meet the inevitable outcome of this situation, regardless if it was for better or for worse. Everything done within the next two days up in the human world — every step, every decision, every action, and every gamble — would matter significantly. Everything, including lives, we're on the line. Loona passes by Blitz who was gathering food that he felt his daughter needed, pacing in between the kitchen and the bathroom. The imp cheerfully wishes his daughter a loving "goodnight" and "sweet dreams" as he disappeared into the bathroom once more, with Loona responding with a simple "night" before opening her bedroom door and heading inside, Jim following closely behind with Loona's rifle in his grasp.

Just as Loona closes the door behind her, Jim tries to grab her attention; "Loona?"

The hellhound turns around while rubbing her eyes, stumbling over to her bed as she answers; "Mmm.. yeah?"

"You think we'll be okay?"

"...I hope so."

No more hiding. No more solace. Somewhere a dark wind blows — a putrid, terrible wind, carrying the weight of a thousand mournful wails.

The gates of the deepest depths shudder with movement, preparing for the hour. Somewhere a lone, dark figure stands before a structure as wretched and rotten as itself. A hideous blade, soaked in a concoction, glints in the orange hue.

Nearly there. Nearly there. Nearly there.

Foul the air. Still the water.

A monotonous sound of white noise begins to fill Loona's ears, growing in volume and intensity as the seconds ticked by. It was a familiar yet uninviting sound, one which was closely associated with vast voids of complete nothingness; a completely vacant space where time or location was completely irrelevant. Soon the sound grew to such an intensity that Loona couldn't bear to ignore it for any longer, causing her to feel utterly restless. Eventually Loona opens her eyes, peering through her half-open eyelids to find… nothing. Literal, endless, blinding nothing. Loona's eyes shoot wide open with alertness as she tries to make heads or tails of where exactly she was, but try to search as she might, she found nothing. It seemed as if she was… nowhere. The lonely hellhound found that she stood within a literal endless black void where nothing seemed to exist. There was no floor, but she was standing. There was no light, yet there was no darkness. There was no flow of air, yet she could breathe. It was almost as if Loona was in a pocket of existence, completely isolated from the rest of known material.

Loona looks around in perplexity, trying to find someone or something but to no avail. She begins calling out; "Hello?? … Hello, anybody there?! … Dad?? … J-Jim?? … ANYONE?!" The hellhound's shrill voice echoed loudly, fading off into obscurity under that faint emanating white noise which seemed to fill the air like the sound of a rolling tide, washing inwards and outwards upon a beach. … No response.

In another fruitless attempt to pinpoint where in this vast emptiness she was, Loona starts looking around a second time, her head practically spinning with each aimless turn she takes. After more near nauseating spinning, Loona stops, holding her head lightly to cope with the sudden vertigo. Suddenly, it hits her; this must be a dream… of course it was! How else could she explain this? Yes, that's what this was; some dumb,

weird, lucid dream. This void that her exhausted brain had created was a result of her state of mind. Yeah, that's exactly what this was! This stupid, pointless void? It was a weird visual metaphor which her fatigued brain had come up with to represent how… to represent how lost she felt. Stranded, even.

With nowhere to go.

Without warning, the sound of distant echoing footsteps reverberates off to Loona's immediate right, somewhere in the blackness, sounding as if it was just out of sight, somewhere in the void. This echoey footfall which seemed to grow progressively louder sends an unexplainable chill up Loona's spine, causing her fur to stand up in foreboding anticipation. The footfall in question sounded slow and deliberate, as if the source of the noise was being cautious as it approached the isolated hellhound, getting ever closer. As Loona stared intently into the pitch blackness in the direction of the echoing footsteps, her nose began to twitch to the smell of something which linger faintly in the air, potent in its presence like the repugnant scent of a smoldering cigarette. Taking a light sniff of the air to the dismay of her senses, Loona realized that it was the scent of decay, the smell of which caused her to turn nauseous and uneasy. Now the footsteps sounded no more than a couple feet away, even though Loona couldn't see anyone! It was as if whatever this stalking 'thing' was had no physical form — like a ghost, haunting her from the depths of the unknown.

Just as soon as this most unsettling footfall started, it stopped, leaving Loona alone in complete and utter silence. Worryingly enough, Loona noticed too that the white noise that had "accompanied" her throughout the duration of this dream had died out along with the footfall, and just as suddenly as well. A deafening silence fills the void around her, causing Loona even greater anxiety, anticipating whatever might come any second with a sense of pure, almost overwhelming dread. With nowhere to hide and nowhere to run, all that the hellhound could do was stand there and wait.

…

That's when she sees it. Just out of the corner of Loona's eye, to her left, was a figure which stood in the near distance. But not just any figure — it was Morger, in a much better condition than he was in reality. The sight of the familiar fellow hellhound causes Loona's eyes to widen in mild shock, accompanied with a bad feeling which rises within every part of her gut like a terrible pit. She couldn't help but feel that something was 'wrong' about the way the male hellhound looked, especially in the way he held his posture which seemed almost too upright; completely rigid and unflinching, as if he was a statue.

The urge to call out to Morger arises within Loona, accompanied by a feeling of sorrow for his current pitiful state in hospital. Ultimately, Loona gives in to the temptation, calling out in a softer voice; "…Morger?"

Morger doesn't answer, nor does he flinch. That was when Loona noticed something odd about his eyes. They seemed to be obscured by a darkness; like a shadow, but more oppressive and dark like the vast, featureless nothingness around them. In spite of Morger's heavily veiled eyes, Loona

could tell that there was a deep sombreness in the way he stared unwaveringly at her, as if he was staring at her with a sense of deep betrayal; an assumption which made Loona's heart sink.

Loona's ears fold down in a sense of guilt, before uttering; "Morger, please… I-It wasn't my fault, I… I-I didn't know that you would—"

Before Loona could finish her plea towards the hellhound standing before her, another distant noise cuts her off, the sound of which causes her to freeze and her ears to stand upright with alertness. Without looking away from the statue-like Morger, Loona listens in to this new distant sound, trying to figure out what exactly it was. It was a shrill, guttural sound which had a foreboding sense of familiarity to it, as if she had heard it before. For better or for worse, Loona at last figured out what exactly this sound was, causing her to feel a sense of growing horror.

It was the sound of a man, wailing with agonizing grief and sorrow.

"…GAH!"

Suddenly, Loona wakes up! She gasps harshly in a moment of fright, her heart racing and a nervous sweat built up on her brow. Luckily for the hellhound, she found herself no longer in the deepest depths of a hopeless dark abyss, but instead in the warm safety of her cherished bed. The sound of rapid panicked breathing fills the room as Loona tries to catch her breath, being able to do so as soon as she realizes that she is safe — at least for now. After gathering her bearings, the freshly awake hellhound lets out a prolonged and steady sigh of relief, though still shaken by the disturbing dream which she fell victim to. That godawful lucid nightmare… What did it mean? Was there a meaning? Why was she in a void, a-and why was Morger there? Why was that "place" full of that deafening white noise, and that… that wailing… who was that wailing?

Another sigh escapes Loona's mouth as she reaches over to the nightstand to retrieve her phone, a very faint creak coming from inside the mattress as the springs lightly compress under the shifting weight. Loona's searching hand pats the surface of the nightstand aimlessly before her fingers finally meet up with the familiar coldness of her phone screen. With the device now enclosed in her hand, the half-awake hellhound pulls the phone towards her before turning it on to check the time; '3:35AM', it read in clear bold letters, standing out from the starry night sky Loona had set as her background.

Today was the day.

Loona lets out a faint groan as pulls herself up to sit upright in her bed, the desire to fall back to sleep having since long gone, vanishing much like the torturous nightmare she had just escaped from. With her back pressed up against the headboard with the additional support of her pillows, Loona focused on waking herself up, preparing herself both physically and mentally for the long arduous journey which awaited her. Thinking about it further, she began to realize that maybe her remark from the day before about the sinner "sending her off to war" rang far truer than she originally thought. Exactly how true this "metaphorical" description was would be answered only with time, and that 'time' couldn't come soon enough. From beyond the foot of her bed in the darkness, Loona spotted the faint outline of Jim, still fast asleep on the spare mattress he had used as his sleeping arrangement for the past five to six days. Regardless of whether everything went according to plan in the next forty hours, one thing was for certain; this would be the final time he would have to sleep in such a humiliating position. There was no denying that this would all end soon, though the nature of the outcome was in doubt.

Thud… Thud… Thud… pat-pat-pat… Click!

Drawing Loona's eyes towards her bedroom door was the sound of Blitz shuffling outside, followed by the sound of the lightswitch being switched on, the light of the overhead bulb seeping through the gap underneath the door. The hellhound listens closely to her father's footsteps, sounding as if he was heading into the kitchen, this assumption being proven true once the muffled sound of flowing water began to fill the air outside, followed by the brief sound of a glass being filled to the brim. In a move which sought to address her restlessness, Loona decided that this was the perfect excuse to get out of bed, proceeding to roll the covers off herself before getting up and quietly making her way outside, careful not to wake Jim who was still fast asleep. Loona's effort to be inconspicuous about her movements proved successful, the second occupant of her room still in a state of rest, even as she opened the door and crept outside before gently closing it behind her. When she turns around, her eyes lock onto Blitz who was still standing in the kitchen with a glass of water in his hands.

It took no time at all for Blitz to acknowledge his daughter's presence, giving her a soft smile; "Morning, Loonie."

Loona nods back as she stretches her arms with a wince; "...Nnngah! Y-Yeah, morning."

Blitz maintains his soft smile as he stood in awkward silence, before making small talk; "How was your sleep?"

His daughter shrugs; “Fine, I guess. Yours?”

“Hah. Ditto,” Blitz grins for a split second before his smile fades; “...So. Back up to the human world today, hey?”

Loona let out a heavy sigh, along with a nod; “Huff— Yep. That’s the plan.”

“Gotcha,” the imp quietly acknowledges, his face displaying a look of faint worry as he spoke; “Can I be real with you, Loonie?”

“Sure,” Loona shrugs once more, rubbing her eyes to wake herself up further. She watches as a look of worry begins to appear within her dad’s yellow eyes as he blinks a few times; this was a dead giveaway to Loona that there was something bothering him. Blitz’s eyes dart towards the ground before looking back up at Loona no less than half a second later, swallowing nervously as he tries to formulate his words.

Eventually, the obviously apprehensive Blitz manages to speak his mind; “…I’m worried about you, Loonie. This whole thing you’re about to do? It could all go to shit just like that. I’m scared for you.”

Now this admission from her father didn’t surprise Loona all that much; after all, he usually was like this when it came to her safety and well-being. In saying this, the way that he expressed his concern this time around sounded more like he was preparing for the worst case scenario as if it was an inevitability, especially with the look of deep trepidation reflecting in his eyes.

Loona gave off a light, understanding nod; “I am as well. But what else can I do, dad? I can’t hide from this thing forever. I’ve got to confront whatever this bullshit is, and end it.”

Blitz shook his head with denial; “W-Why can’t we wait for this thing to pass? That ‘Malloy’ fucker has to get tired and move on at some point, right? F-Find some other cocksucker’s soul to sacrifice??”

“Look at what waiting around has done, dad,” Loona refutes with a look of regret in her eyes; “A friend of mine is in hospital fighting for his life because I waited around for too long. He’s hooked up to all sorts of drips and tubes because I got complacent. I-If this keeps on going, and I keep

sitting around and doing nothing, you might be next! That could be you in the hospital on the verge of death! Me, going up there with Jim? That's what's going to put a stop to this."

The imp wasn't convinced, protesting further; "But sweetie—"

"But nothing, Blitz!" Loona raises her voice, but with seriousness rather than anger; "I've got to do this. It's my responsibility to end this, and I will! Just please, I need you to be with me on this one. Do what I planned out with you yesterday, and everything will be fine — I'll be fine! Will you do that for me, dad? … Can you?"

Blitz furrows his brow with even more worry for his daughter's safety, not once losing eye-contact with his daughter who he knew wouldn't budge from her position. Try as he might to convince himself otherwise, the imp knew that his daughter was right; there was no other plausible way out of this mess. He pursed his lips for a split second as he thought, exhaling through his nostrils as he began nodding softly, essentially making a silent promise to Loona that he would put trust in her plan.

"…Okay," Blitz capitulates in a hushed voice; "I can. I-I'll follow along with the plan, I promise! Just promise me one thing in return, please?"

"Sure. And what's that?" Loona asks.

"…Promise me you'll be okay?"

This question certainly wasn't lost on Loona. Would she be okay? Now that was a good question, and one which she knew couldn't be answered right away, because who the hell knew what was going to happen at this point? In any other given point in time, Loona would be completely frank with Blitz and say exactly what she was thinking — but this time was different. There was something about the worrisome and fearful look that the imp was giving which made Loona reconsider her answer; he looked terrified about the prospect of his own daughter being harmed in any way, or worse.

Although it was difficult for her to answer right away, Loona mustered up a soft reassuring smile before gently speaking; "I promise, dad."

Just as Loona answers Blitz's most pressing question, the faint sound of her bedroom door opening squeaks from behind her, prompting the hellhound to turn around and find that Jim had just woken up, his brown oilskin coat folded over his arm and his gray flat cap held in his left hand. After letting out a suppressed yawn of his own, he lazily waves before mumbling; "Morning Loona… Blitz."

Blitz's demeanor switches from being somber to his usual cocky self, to the brief annoyance of Loona; "Well, well, look who's decided to finally get off his ass."

"Fuck up, you scrotum," Jim grumbles with a thin grin, obviously not taking Blitz's snarky remark to heart. If anything, he had grown used to the insufferable imp's shitty attitude which was laced with a misplaced sense of superiority. To save his breath, Jim turns his attention to Loona; "So when are we heading up?"

"Soonish. Give me a minute to wake up first," Loona requests, yawning again involuntarily in reaction to Jim's own contagious yawn. She adds; "You still remember the plan, right?"

"Yeah, of course I do. Like my life depends on it." Jim remarks in an attempt at dry humor, his brief smirk fading immediately after realizing that his comment was far truer than first thought. He deviates away from the comment; "Oh by the way, Loona, I figured out a spot where we could camp out."

Loona raises her eyebrow slightly; "Yeah? Go on, I'm listening."

"So I was having a squiz at that map I drew. You know how there's that big bugger-off group of hills which look over town on the east side? It's full of all sorts of bushes and shit, but I reckon if we want a good view of the town, that's probably our best option."

This proposal wasn't lost on Loona who nodded with serious consideration; "Gotcha. How much will we be able to see?"

"Mm… probably about three quarters of the town I reckon?" Jim guessed; "It's a fair few meters above town, so we should be able to see a decent amount."

“Let’s hope you’re right,” Loona comments, before then spotting a pair of large dark green bags and bedrolls which Blitz had prepared as he had promised the night before. Loona carefully examines the collection of gear from where she stood, checking in a quick glance if Blitz had remembered everything herself and Jim needed for the one-way trip. To her surprise, it seemed as if he had in fact remembered to pack adequately, discovering that he even slid in two matchboxes and lighters which appeared to be brand new, along with extra bottles of water which were stuffed into the bag’s individual slots. After investigating further by opening up each bag and sifting through its contents, Loona was convinced that everything was sorted — It was time.

Loona turns back to Blitz and gives him a simple instruction; “Get the grimoire, we’re going up.”

Thirty-Eight Hours Until The Ritual…

Detective Work

An icy wind blows through the dense bushland as Loona steps through the portal while pulling on her maroon jacket, the bite of the air brushing against her fur with its unforgiving chill. Jim steps through once Loona was out of the way, heaving both bags over his shoulders with a bit of struggle so that Loona could have the opportunity to slip on her jacket. Once she had adjusted her jacket by tugging it down, Loona outstretched her hand towards Jim to grab her respective bag, the human gladly handing it over to her upon request, removing the extra weight bearing down torturously upon his shoulders. The amount of clutter that both Loona and Jim had to bring along with them was almost staggering. Not only did they have to haul these two huge bags full of camping gear, but Loona also had to bring along her newly acquired rifle which wasn't exactly small, resorting to resting it over her left shoulder as she would with a long-handled axe.

Blitz's shrill voice yells from the other side of the portal; "Remember, Loonie-Pie! Stay safe and make sure to slaughter those sons-of-whores!! I LOVE YOUUU!!"

"I'll try!" Loona calls back, watching as the portal instantaneously shuts before her, leaving her practically stuck in the human world once again though this time with good company. Loona turns to Jim beside her to make a dry-humored remark; "Home sweet home, huh?"

Jim let out a long, drawn out sigh, a melancholic smile appearing on his face; "Yeah, for sure. Doesn't feel like it though, not just yet... Still got this eldritch horror to fucken deal with."

Loona let out a grunt in agreement as she took in her surroundings, noticing that the sun was just about to rise for another day to the east, a mesmerizing orange hue glowing faintly through the surrounding thicket of towering coolabah trees. Another gentle gust of icy wind swayed the outstretching branches cluttered with plentiful leaves, causing a soothing rustling sound to fill the air around them. It all felt and sounded so peaceful — the calm before the storm.

Loona continues to squint into the darkness which was slowly vanishing with the sunrise; "Fuck, I can't see a thing! Do you know where we are, Jim?"

The local scanned his surroundings himself; "Yeah nah, no clue. I can't see that much ahead of us either. You got a light in that bag?"

“Hang on, I’ll check.” Loona obliged to look, heaving the bag off her shoulders before resting it on the ground with a light “thump”. After opening up the bag from the main zipper, Loona begins sifting through the hastily packed contents, shoving away cans of food and one too many first-aid bandages as her search continues. Before too long, she found what she sought after; resting towards the bottom of this large dark green camping bag was a long black flashlight. Loona grabs the newfound source of light and pulls it out, aiming it towards the ground before pressing the button, allowing for the ground to be adequately lit up by the flashlight’s bright LED casted beam. With the flashlight now switched on, Loona casts the beam upwards into the surrounding thicket, shrubbery, trunks, and branches alike being washed with the potent white beam, cutting through the darkness like a hot knife through butter. The sight of a fleeing wallaby causes Loona to jump in fright, before cursing it out to Jim’s amusement.

A sense of familiarity began to appear in Jim’s eyes as he scanned their surroundings, slowly but surely coming to a realization; “Just a minute… Hmm… Yeah nah, I think I know where we are! Pretty sure I’ve been here once.”

“How can you tell? Everything looks exactly the same.” Loona asks, having a difficult time trying to make heads or tails of which direction was which.

Jim smirks, feeling as if he had just bested his hellhound friend in the field of wooded navigation. Regardless of whether it was meant to show off his knowledge or to be genuinely helpful, the young experienced bushman begins to lecture; “How can I tell? Just the way the ground seems to rise up over there. Now if I’m not mistaken, I think we’re at the base of that massive hill I was talking about camping on. That wind seems Easterly, so we’re most likely facing to… yeah, probably to the West. You know this sorta stuff when you’ve been out here long enough.”

Loona couldn’t help but scoff at Jim’s perceived cockiness; “Psh! Whatever you say, smartass. So are we scaling this thing or not?”

“After you,” Jim says, gesturing with an open palm for Loona to lead the way.

Loona says nothing more as she begins to move forward into the continuous bushland before her, making her way up the steadily ascending terrain with Jim following closely behind. Their packs weighed down on their backs like terrible deadweights as they moved further and further up into the slowly retreating darkness, the sun slowly but surely rising to the East as Loona’s flashlight danced off the bark of every tree trunk she passed. With the steadily approaching daylight came the gentle sound of the native birds awakening from their sleep, the gentle sound of faint birdsong beginning to echo through the trees before them, like a military bugler announcing the awakening hour. After what felt like an eternity of scaling up this continuous ascending hill, the ground seemed to level up just a few feet before them. It seemed to Loona as if they had at last reached the

summit of this massive hill, allowing for the hellhound to breathe a momentary sigh of relief. Upon finally reaching this apparent summit, Loona also discovered that there was a sizable clearing where the trees dispersed; a perfect spot for herself and Jim to set up camp.

The lead of the pair of hikers stops in the dead center of the spacious clearing, setting down her camping back off her shoulders to her instantaneous relief. Jim does the same, plonking his own pack a foot away before rubbing his shoulders from the weight they had to endure. Loona begins to make herself familiar with their new surroundings as she catches her breath, having since turned off her flashlight as it was no longer needed, the first rays of morning sun providing enough light to make Loona's handheld device redundant. It didn't take long for the hellhound to notice the mesmerizing view to the East, overlooking the picturesque landscape which she was in the midst of. Loona takes a moment to gaze out into the vast rolling landscape before her, her mind wandering into a state of awe over just how beautiful it all appeared. She was able to see everything; pastures of plentiful farmland, scattered clusters of trees and distant forests, a winding river, and in the foreground in the shadow of this towering hill, the township of Morrisvale. If only she could appreciate all of this splendor in a better time. Now that Loona had scaled the face of this towering mound of earth, it was now time for her next arguably more tedious objective; set up camp.

Another icy breeze skims through the hill Loona stands atop as she begins unzipping her massive bag, quickly finding the dismantled canvas tent, folded neatly and bound with lengths of rope. Alongside the tent canvas was a bundle of poles and tent pegs, all of which Loona needed to set up her temporary home. The hellhound tries her hardest to figure out where to start, staring at the bundle of tent poles held in her grip. Before too long, she grumbles in frustration; "Nnngh, dammit! Where the hell do I start…?"

"Need help over there?" Jim calls out from a few feet away, the young bushman in the middle of setting up his own tent with far more success.

"Rrgh— No, I'm fine. I-I can do this," Loona tries to assure, furrowing her brow as she tries to bury one of the tent poles into the ground in a fruitless attempt to start somewhere. Loona tries to jam the pole into the dirt in hope that it would stand up, only managing to scuff the dirt as it fell with a dull metallic thud. The clearly inexperienced camper bares her teeth in frustration, which only intensifies when the second attempt proves to be as unsuccessful as her first. In a short burst of boiling frustration, Loona growls as she punches the ground with a clenched fist; "NGAH! Stay up your glorified dildo!!"

A brief cackle emanates from behind Loona in Jim's direction, to Loona's annoyance and embarrassment. She grimaced as Jim spoke once again; "You sure you're alright over there? Starting to sound like you need some help!"

“I told you I’m fine! Just give me a damn minute,” Loona barks in a defensive way, not wanting to admit that she did, in fact, need some major assistance. Her half-hearted assurances obviously didn’t work as intended as Loona began to hear Jim approach her, his brown boots crunching the dirt underneath them before stopping to the hellhound’s immediate right. Although she was turned away, Loona could feel Jim’s presence standing over her as she knelt in the grass and dirt, a pitiful excuse for a “tent” laying before her in a disorganized mess. She darts her head up towards Jim with a stubborn look in her eyes; “What?”

“Mate, you’re struggling down there. Come on, admit it. You need assistance,” Jim states with a knowing look in his eyes. There was no convincing him otherwise.

“Uhh, no, I really don’t,” Loona protests adamantly; “And so what if I am? If I can’t set up this piece-of-shit, I’ll just sleep without it! No big deal, I’ve done it before.”

Jim scoffs at this proposal; “Oh come off it, you’re not sleeping outside in the cold like some mutt! You go off and do that, and you’ll die of hypothermia. Me personally, I don’t want you freezing to death on me. You obviously haven’t done this before, so what do ya reckon; will you let me help or not? I can teach you some things.”

A tempting and helpful proposal to be sure, but one which Loona felt she couldn’t accept upfront. After all, even after all this time of occasionally relying on the support of Blitz, Jim, and everyone else in between, the concept of outwardly asking for assistance was one which was still completely foreign to her. Although Loona despised the concept of having to ask for help, at the end of the day, it wasn’t as if she was making any progress with setting up the tent on her own. Yet another cold chill swept through the coolabah trees, coaxing Loona to at last make her final decision on the matter. The defeated and clearly embarrassed hellhound doesn’t say a word, instead gesturing for the experienced young outdoorsman to come assist her.

There was no hesitation at all on Jim’s part as he got to work, grabbing the fallen tent pole and holding it upright in the little divot in the earth which Loona had created beforehand. Jim instructs Loona to hold the upright pole in place, an instruction which Loona abides by. This allows the bushman to return to his respective bag a few short paces away, pulling out a camping mallet before returning to the length of metal poking upwards from the ground. Loona watches as Jim approaches her with the business end of the mallet in his grasp, the hardwood handle pointed towards her. He gives a direction; “Aight, take this here. Gonna get you to hammer this pole down for me.”

Loona rolls her eyes as she grabs the mallet’s handle, before lining the business end with the top of the tent pole; “I know how to hammer stuff down, you know? I know I’m inexperienced with camping, but come on! I’m not stupid.”

“I know, I know,” Jim chuckles softly; “But we just gotta start with the basics. Now ya hammering or what?”

Jim’s camping apprentice doesn’t say another word as she gets to driving the stick of metal into the ground, each contact with the pole producing a metallic thwacking sound which echoes through the otherwise quiet and serene wilderness. After a couple of swings, the first tent pole was now embedded firmly into the ground. Loona’s personal tutor grabs hold of the upright pole and gently shakes it, making sure that it was sturdy enough. He looks back towards Loona after being left satisfied with the results; “See? No harm in asking for help, now is there?”

Loona examines her work with indifference as she replies; “When did I say there was?”

“When you were being adamant about doing it yourself,” Jim states with a half smirk, getting up from his crouching position with a groan, allowing himself to stretch his temporarily aching shoulders.

“Well excuse me for wanting to be independent,” Loona remarks with a light grin, grabbing another pole and repeating the procedure a second time a few steps away; “Besides, it’s not like I do this everyday! Or, well, ever before…”

Jim raises his brow with heightened curiosity, observing Loona as the second tent pole falls over to her brief frustration; “You’ve never been camping, huh? So where’d you get all this stuff then?”

“Oh no, I didn’t get all this! Dad stole this old crap a while ago from some freaky weirdo he knew. It’s all just been sitting around collecting dust,” Loona clarifies while repositioning the second tent pole with more success, at last being able to drill it firmly into the earth.

The human attentively nods his head; “Right… Ah well, first time for everything. You’re doing alright for a first-timer, yanno?”

Loona smirks with self-satisfaction as she gets up from her knees, giving herself a short break from kneeling in the dirt and dusting herself off. She answers the human’s open observation; “I don’t remember asking for a critique, but thanks. You gotta admit this is slow and annoying as fuck, right?”

Jim nods in wholehearted agreement as he helps Loona drape the canvas over the firmly embedded tent poles; “Oh no, it can be! But hey, that’s just the nature of camping for ya! My brother Paul and I used to do this stuff all the time when we were kids. We used to camp down at this creek not too far from here, just a little ways to the east of where we are now. We used to go fishing and find some other assorted dumb shit we felt like doing at the time. It was nice being out there in this beautiful country. Maybe when this is all over, I might take you down there some time to have a look.”

“Hey. If it involves setting up tents all day like this piece of crap here? You can count me out,” Loona says in a joking manner, a thin light-hearted smirk spread across her muzzle as she makes the finishing touches to her designated sandy-yellow canvas tent. On the contrary to what she had just stated, Loona did think fondly about the proposal, thinking that maybe it wouldn’t be all that bad of an idea. A dull thudding sound fills the air as Loona begins nailing each tent peg into the ground, threading each metallic spike through four individual ropes attached to the canvas itself — this would help hold the tent’s overall shape, assuring that it wouldn’t topple over while Loona rested inside. Though this tedious setting-up procedure had started off rocky and with much cursing, Loona felt as if she had finally gotten a handle at the bare basics of camping; or at least she hoped so.

“Well how about this,” Jim proposes as he nails the tent peg opposite to Loona, managing to hammer the metal spike into the ground in just two swings; “To make it that bit more enjoyable for ya if and when we do go, I’ll make sure to bring you some of my best whiskey. Hah— You can have the whole bottle if ya like! How’s that sound, hm?”

Loona’s smirk quickly turned into a toothy appetized grin, savoring the idea of that sweet, tempting liquor which she yearned for more than she’d like to admit. She looks up towards Jim with an excited twinkle in her eyes, clicking her fingers and pointing towards the human; “Now you’re talking! You promise me it’ll be something good?”

Jim let out a short burst of laughter, playing along with Loona’s apparent raise in enthusiasm; “HAHAH!! Matey, I’m not promising anything! What I have is what I have!”

The hellhound shook her head as her grin faded to a faint smirk, before pursing her lips and turning around to face westwards, staring back out into that glorious scenic backdrop, noticing the faint mist which hung low over the terrain. By this time, the sun had well and truly risen to the east, the first hour of daylight having now arrived, allowing for Loona to have a completely unobstructed view of the township, resting in the shadow of the colossal mound of earth Loona stood atop. From where she stood idly amidst the rays of the pleasantly warm morning sun, the array of buildings and streets looked minuscule, almost as if it was all an elaborately crafted diorama. Loona pulls out the illustrated map that Jim had sketched the night before, unfolding the large sheet of paper which

was folded into quarters to compare it to the real thing. Upon viewing the map, Loona couldn't help but feel impressed, raising her brow as her eyes darted between the detailed illustration and its real life equivalent. Somehow, Jim had managed to draw a scarily accurate map with only a select few scaling inconsistencies. In fact, Loona dared to consider it 'perfect'.

As Loona intently takes note of the town below, she hears Jim coming up from behind her, his footsteps drawing closer before he finally appears off to her right, his hands tucked into his oilskin coat's pockets and that same gray flat cap perched on his head. Jim mimics Loona's actions by observing his hometown intently, his face having lost all earlier expression from their lively conversation less than a minute ago. After a few seconds of momentary silence where the only sound being made was the call of a nearby magpie, Jim finally spoke; "When are you planning on going in?"

Loona doesn't answer immediately, instead plotting silently for a moment. Before too long, the hellhound replies; "I suppose when everything starts to open down there. You got the time?"

"Nup." Jim shook his head as he gestured to the sun with a brief head tilt; "But judging by the sun over there, I reckon it's around six-thirty."

"Well what time do things start opening?" Loona asks, continuing to stare off deeper into town, especially the town center where the most stores were located.

Jim points off lazily into the town center; "Remember that pharmacy I rushed you to when I found you half dead? That'll be the first one, it always opens early at Seven O'clock sharp. Doctor Price is always there, afterall he owns that joint, I'm sure he'll remember ya. Why, you thinking of starting there to search?"

"I mean, I guess," Loona shrugs nonchalantly; "Where else can I start?"

"Aye, that's fair," Jim huffs, his breath creating a vapor in the cold air as he exhales; "You know, Price may know about that 'Harriette' woman you're looking for. He knows most people, even more than I do, so I'm sure he's met her once or twice. Personally, I've never seen her, nor have I heard of her up until today."

"Here's hoping he does," Loona says openly, tucking her hands into the pockets of her maroon jacket before turning around and walking back towards their tents. She was quick to discover that at some point during her reconnaissance of the town that Jim had set up a makeshift campfire roughly

in the center, relatively close to their respective tents; it was made of a small pile of twigs and broken up branches gathered into a neat pile in the middle of a small circle of rocks, ready to be set alight. Positioned next to Loona's tent and resting on a long sheet of spare tarpaulin was Loona's rifle, the 'Mauser Gewehr 98', resting alongside the two spare clips of ammunition it came with, as well as the rifle's pristine bayonet which was laying adjacent in a dark-brown leather sheath.

A creeping feeling of hunger emerged as Loona's stomach began to growl, prompting her to return to the two camping bags lying in between the pair of tents. In consideration with Jim's understandable fear of having to consume food of Hellish origin, Loona had made sure to pack a whole lot of canned food from her private stash of Human World foodstuffs. In all honesty with herself, Loona was glad that she had packed only human world food beforehand; afterall, it did taste miles better than the food available in hell, half of which tasted like assorted garbage and sewage-filled slop in comparison. The hellhound approaches her bag and crouches down to open it up, zipping it wide open to find the canned human world food that she had packed, the tin containers with brightly-colored labels gawking right back at her, ready to quench her naked unraveling hunger. Resting loosely beside the collection of canned consumables was a can opener Loona had brought along, the metallic object glimmering slightly in the morning sunlight which reached into the depths of the camping bag.

While licking her lips slightly with the growing anticipation of canned food, Loona pulls out two cans of 'braised steak and onion' — one for herself and one for Jim — as well as the can opener as her means to access the appetizing contents. Loona hollers for Jim to come over and grab his breakfast as she sits herself down in the grass and dirt, all the while latching the can opener to the first can. Once the mechanical can opener is attached, Loona begins cranking the handle counterclockwise which allows the utensil to cut into the aluminum lid. Each revolution of the can opener's crank propelled it further along the circumference, allowing the lid to loosen gradually to the point where it was barely hanging on by a malleable tin thread. With one final twist and a light snapping sound, Loona pulls the lid straight off before discarding it to her side, intending to retrieve it once she is done with her meal. Out of an act of courtesy, Loona repeats the same task of opening with the second can before handing it to Jim who was sitting beside her, the young outdoorsman promptly expressing gratitude for his friend's genuine act of kindness.

After taking a swig of her cold steak and onion concoction and swallowing a mouthful, Loona strikes up further constructive conversation by asking; "So you're going back home to get your rifle?"

Jim nods after consuming a portion of his own can; "Yep, that's the plan. That, and grab a few other things we might need. I could grab a bottle of piss for the both of us, how's that sound?"

Loona felt her appetite for alcohol arise within a part of her mind, reminiscing about the premium liquor she had consumed in Jim's homestead a month back, as a toast to her highly unlikely friendship with this twenty-two-year-old bushman who just hours before was just about to blast her

face off in fear for his own life. Loona could still remember Jim's exact words, echoing in her head as if it was a recording; *"How about this? We have a drink for our.. successful hunting trip today, huh?"* The memory made her smile with sweet reminiscence, remembering the sense of safety and tranquility she felt that day. After her moment of reminiscence, Loona gives her verdict on Jim's offer; "Mixing alcohol with handling guns, huh? Wow. That sure is going to end well for us, Jim. But you know what? That'd be great. Hey, bring some of those glasses you have, too!"

"Yeah don't worry, I will!" Jim reassures with a grin, starting to blissfully anticipate the soothing premium, velvety booze he kept up in a liquor rack in his considerably old-fashioned kitchen. The conversation was about to diminish before Jim quickly realized something; "Oh shoot, I should also grab my phone come to think of it. You got your phone number there? I'll call ya once I get to it."

"Yeah I have it," Loona obliges before inquiring; "You sure you'll be able to call me? You know, with my phone being from hell and all."

Jim shrugs; "Yeah nah, good point, hey? I dunno about that one. No harm in trying though."

With this prompt to snap out of her idleness, Loona leans over and reaches for her still weighty camping bag which sat slumped over behind her, letting out a light heave as she dragged it lazily across the suntanned brownish-green grass. A search for something to write on commenced, with Loona's arm reaching back into the bag for another shuffle-through. Personally Loona thought that this search was futile, presuming that Blitz wouldn't have thought to pack something trivial as a pen or paper on a camping trip out of all things. Just as she was about to give up on her hopeless search, Loona spots it; that same notepad and pen she had used to write down her questions to that sinner, 'Jack Foster'.

Huh. Blitz really did think to pack literally everything.

Loona grabs hold of both notepad and pen and pulls them both out, flicking the flimsy notepad over a few times to find an unused blank page. In no time at all, Loona finds a spot to jot down her phone number, scribbling it down in an impressively neat cursive that even she was impressed with. The hellhound's eyes quickly proofread what she had written to make sure that it was correct, confirming such to herself before tearing out the page and handing it to Jim who gladly took it. Jim's attentive eyes examine the phone number hastily noted down on the small slip of paper, his lips moving weakly as he reads it to himself.

After going over the number for a few more seconds than necessary, Jim nods silently as he stows the note into the pocket of his long brown coat, looking back up towards Loona. That's when his

eyes turn to the rifle behind her as he gestures to it and asks; “So what’s happening with that thing there? We can’t just leave it here for some fuckarse to come along and steal it.”

Now this was a good question. Loona and Jim would need to leave the campsite to complete their respective objectives for the day, so who exactly would keep watch for the rifle? If someone happened to stumble across this rendezvous point of theirs, the sight of the weapon would prompt them either to steal it or report it to the police — for painfully obvious reasons, that was something both Loona and Jim couldn’t afford nor allow to happen. The hellhound thought for a moment for a quick solution before suggesting; “How about you take it with you? That, and the ammo and bayonet. Those coat pockets of yours would be big enough for them. Obviously I can’t take it ‘cause I’m heading into town. If I go into town with that over my shoulder? I’ll be in the deepest shit imaginable!”

Jim nods in agreement to the plan; “Well if that’s what I have to do, sure thing. You got that ‘blessed bullet’ thing with ya? Probably best if I take that with me, too.”

“Was just gonna say,” Loona quickly agrees while pulling it out of her maroon jacket’s pocket, promptly handing it over to Jim who grabbed it carefully; “Just be careful with it, okay? DO NOT lose it.”

Jim nodded his head sternly and deliberately in utter compliance just as he slid the blessed bullet into his coat’s left pocket, making sure to slide it far into the depths as he spoke; “Understood. I promise I won’t lose it.”

“I know you won’t,” Loona assured as she relaxed her tone of voice, managing to muster up a soft smile in a visual sign of the deep and thorough trust she put into Jim. Loona took note of the sun rising further up into the sky above them, signaling that both the morning proper and the difficult battle ahead had well and truly begun. The hellhound nudged Jim’s shoulder before saying; “Come on, let’s finish this grub, then we’ll leave.”

The pair of campers resumed eating their bitterly cold breakfast in silence, basking in the comforting warmth of the morning sun which washed over them like a towering wave. It is said that being out in nature tends to make one feel certain things, whether that be anything from a true, blissful happiness or a dreary, somber melancholy, anything in between or, just maybe, something else entirely. In other instances, people tend to interpret nature as if it were an interpretive work of art in a gallery, drawing inspiration from what they were currently going through. An interesting set of concepts to be sure, and concepts which certainly applied to what Loona was feeling while sitting in the midst of that wondrous Australian bushland.

First and foremost, Loona could feel the warmth of the sun being cast onto her back, warming her up as if it was nature's way of providing comfort in defense against the bitey cold, like a heartfelt embrace or a mellow blanket. It was as if that great, colossal mass of fire and unfathomable heat was assuring the hellhound below that everything would be okay; that everything would fall into place as it should be. All would be well. Exactly how much of that was factual or mere "sweet nothings" was up to anyone's guess, with a concrete answer which would only be revealed in the fullness of time. After engulfing another portion of her steak and onion straight out of the can, Loona pivots her head towards Jim, looking at him with a sense of deep camaraderie. With all things considered, Loona couldn't help but enjoy his company in spite of the current dangers that enjoyment brought upon them both. Jim was her friend, and that was that; there was nothing anyone could say or do which would convince her otherwise.

Eventually Jim notices Loona looking at him, prompting him to turn his head towards her before giving off a smile and a nod in acknowledgement. Loona returns the gesture with her own faint yet heartfelt smile and nod before looking away, their eyes averting away from each other as they continue eating. Another cold chill blew faintly through the trees which was nullified by the sun's pleasant warmth, the sounds of nature settling its influence in the air about the two lonesome campers.

There was much work to be done.

Eight O'Clock.

It had been half an hour since Loona and Jim had parted ways to embark on their respective objectives; Jim heading off in the westerly direction towards his house with Loona's 'Gewehr 98' rifle and ammunition in tow, while Loona briskly made her way into town to begin asking around for her next target, 'Harriette Edgecliffe'. The descent down the colossal towering hill took longer than Loona had assumed it would take, finding herself having to maneuver around countless dense foliage and trees, all the while trying her best not to trip over. During Loona's descent, there were some instances where her jacket nearly got caught on some loose branches, causing the hellhound to promptly snap the culprits off in frustration; there was no chance in hell Loona was going to take her favorite jacket being torn by some stupid goddamn plant!

After much struggle and staggering through the dense woodlands for what felt like an eternity, Loona could at last see a clearing up ahead, marking the end of her descent. Though the trees still obscured Loona's full view of this apparent clearing, she could tell that beyond the trees was a road; the unmistakable dark texture of asphalt and white road markings visible through the break in the tree line. Loona watches as a large truck rumbles across the asphalt heading into town, the sound of the engine brakes suddenly bellowing off like the roar of an animal as it prepares to enter

the township proper. The hellhound gave herself a quick five-second breather, inhaling through her nose and exhaling gently through her mouth in order to collect herself. With this calming procedure out of the way, Loona promptly changes into her human disguise, being engulfed in a blue shimmering light and emerging no more than a second later in her human form.

Upon clearing the tree line and stepping out onto the side of the road, Loona was mildly surprised to discover that she was closer to town than she had first anticipated. In fact, the now disguised hellhound discovered that she was less than a hundred meters away from the town center, with rows of different stores and businesses on either side of the road in clear view, the footpaths loosely populated with locals going about their relatively mundane daily lives. Within no more than ten meters before Loona was a road bridge spanning a wide vegetation-rich gully, at the bottom of which was a steadily running creek, the gently flowing water running at its own pace as if time had no authority over it. The bridge in question was Loona's only means of crossing safely, and a means which the disguised hellhound took, promptly crossing over the bridge through the pedestrian section at a moderate walking pace. Loona's eyes were firmly locked onto the rows of old-fashioned timber and brick store buildings she was fast approaching, the paving-stone footpath in front of each store covered by a row of long, continuous shop-front verandahs of different styles and ages, protecting anyone who walked under them from the beaming sun high above. As the woman on a mission continued to make progress towards the town center fast approaching, her eyes caught sight of the over century-old, two-storey sandstone police station off to her right peripheral, the sight of which conjured memories of being held up in the holding cells to the rear of that terrible place. This prompts a light shiver, with Loona silently hoping she wouldn't have to go through an ordeal like that again.

A few short meters later, Loona was at last in the midst of the long line of buildings, the heat from the sun now off her back thanks to the shop-front verandahs above her. A continuous line of signs were suspended from the soffit, indicating the business which occupied each building; This is what Loona focuses on as she continues strolling with her intention being to find the pharmacy, not having to search for long before finding it. The faded-yellow timber sign with bold black lettering read as follows:

"Ernest Price & Son's General Pharmacy — Est. 1959"

The entrance door swings open with a light metallic squeak when Loona pushes it open, allowing herself inside. She was quick to discover that she was the pharmacy's lone occupant as the door gently shut from behind, instantly drowning out any outside noise which was replaced with the faint hum of the tube fluorescent lights which hung above. The lone visitor to this quiet business begins calling out, albeit in a mild tone; "Hello? Anybody here? … Uhh— P-Price, you here?"

Suddenly, the muffled sound of movement emerged from behind a white door positioned behind the counter, confirming to Loona that, indeed, someone else was in the building with her. In no time at all, the door gently opens, revealing a middle-aged man with a pair of glasses and a graying beard

as he steps out to greet his newest customer. Just as the man comes face-to-face with the visitor, he stops with his mouth slightly agape, and a look of recognition manifesting in his eyes. He squints while pointing his finger towards Loona, hesitating for a second before finally asking; “Haven’t we met before?”

“If by “met”, you mean me almost dying in your office? Then yeah, we’ve “met”,” Loona replied with a “healthy” dose of dry humor; “You’re Victor Price, right?”

The pharmacist’s otherwise slack jaw stiffened as his mouth curled up into a half-smile before he replied with; “That I am. And you’re that “journalist”, yeah?”

Loona shrugs, though otherwise somewhat amazed that the middle-aged man had remembered her lame cover story off by heart; “I guess.”

“Righto, fair dinkum…” Victor Price acknowledges with a phrase which Loona couldn’t even begin to understand. He props both his elbows on top of the counter, clasping his hands together before asking; “So what can I do for ya?”

This prompts Loona to state her purpose of visitation; “Oh! Uhh, yeah, about that. Look, I was wondering if you know a person who I’m looking for. I’ve been told that you know a lot of people here in town, and I was hoping you could help me.”

Victor Price let off a half-hearted shrug of his own; “I suppose I could. Not as if there’s nothing much else to do on a Sunday morn’, now is there? Who’s this chap you’re looking for?”

“Her name’s ‘Harriette Edgecliffe’ or something like that. Do you know her?” Loona inquires, hoping beyond hope that the name would ring any of the pharmacist’s proverbial bells.

Luckily for Loona, it appeared as if this name did ring a bell for Doctor Price. However the exact “bell” which was rung provoked a hint of a frown behind the pharmacist’s short-haired graying beard; a frown which wasn’t directed at Loona per se, but towards the mention of the old woman’s name. Victor Price pushes his glasses further towards his face while standing upright once more, letting off a short grunt before saying; “Mmrrgh. ‘Harriette Edgecliffe’, huh? That old crone. … Well shit, do I know Harriette Edgecliffe. Why do you ask?”

“Does it really matter why I’m asking?” Loona asks, a hint of impatience beginning to emerge within the forefront of her mind.

The pharmacist shook his head slowly; “Not really, nah. What I’m wondering is why you’d wanna go find a rotten old bitch like that. I know you’se a journalist and your job is to speak with lowlives every so often, but Jesus Christ! Out of all people, bloody Harriette? God, you must be mad!”

A brief snicker escaped Loona’s mouth in reaction to the verdict about herself, recognizing that this presumption was far truer than the pharmacist realized; “We’re all a bit batshit crazy, old man. From the sounds of it, you don’t think highly of her, do you?”

“That I don’t. I never have,” Doctor Price bluntly states, his face forming a thin scowl which wrinkled his cheeks and brow.

Loona raises one eyebrow faintly; “Can I ask why?”

“You may,” Doctor Price flatly obliges. He began to explain his simmering, seething hatred of the subject matter; “She’s a nasty old battle-axe, you know? Absolutely nasty. These days, everyone knows Harriette as this… sick, old, hermit woman who hides up in her dad’s old house a few miles north of here. She rarely leaves that shitshack, thank the good Lord, usually just gets groceries delivered up there, ‘cause her legs just don’t work as well as they used to. I’m seventy-five years old in about a month now, so I remember how she was when she used to haul her arse into town and chuck her shit at people — oh matey, did she chuck a lot of shit.”

“What did she used to do?” Loona asks with a hint of growing intrigue.

Doctor Price let out a wheezing fit of laughter; “HAH! Oh Christ, what didn’t she used to do? Harriette did a lot, caused a helluva lot of trouble. Drunken outbursts; unprovoked fistfights; kicking people’s dogs if they looked at her the wrong way; literally pissing wherever she felt like it; screeching at random kids playing out in public because “were being too loud”, or some dumb horseshit excuse like that. When my dear old mum and dad were still alive, when she was about thirty-or-so-years-old, Harriette used to love accusing little ten-year-old me of sneaking onto her property and “trying to steal my horses” — she never had horses, not in her entire life; in fact, she hated animals. She kept telling dear old mum and dad that if she ever saw me up that way again, she’d belt me.”

The gossiping pharmacist froze for a moment, his eyes shifting towards the front door behind Loona before looking back at her as if he was preparing to tell a secret. Sure enough, that 'secret' came no less than a few seconds later; "Now you haven't heard this from me, young lady, but hear this. There's an open secret in this town that everyone knows about but refuses to acknowledge. Now, this isn't because we don't care, but because it's best that we leave her crimes to rot silently away along with her; she's already being punished by God with her failing, decrepit husk of a body. Now get this; I am almost a-hundred-percent certain that she was involved in Victor Malloy's little crime sprees. I suppose you could say that she was his 'right-hand-woman', next to that wanker Jack Foster. The thing is, we don't know exactly what she did, nor have the rozzers figured that out either, but we all knew she did… something."

"Where did you say she lives again?" Loona asks after being taken aback by this pharmacist's lengthy tell-all.

Doctor Price raises his arm, pointing to his right; "If you head up about five miles north of here and travel on the road which takes you up to Toowomba, there's an old house in the middle of this field off to the right-hand side. That's where Harriette lives. You'll know it's her house because across the road from it, on the opposite side, is this rotting farm shed with an old tractor pinned down by its collapsed roof. It's been like that for years."

Every single detail of the old woman's address was etched into Loona's mind, the disguised hellhound making sure to remember it photographically down to a tee. In fact, Loona could visualize the house and landmarks already, bringing along with it the next phase of her objective — to pay 'Harriette' a visit. With a newfound sense of optimism, Loona nods to the pharmacist before her with a simple "thank you", before turning around and making her way towards the—

"Oh hey, one more thing," Doctor Price calls out to his departing visitor, with something else on his mind.

Loona stops in her tracks before turning around to look towards the store owner; "Yeah, what?" Upon answering, Loona watches as the now growingly troubled Victor Price seemed to hesitate with what he was about to say, his tongue stuck firmly to the roof of his mouth.

Eventually, he manages to ask; "D-Did you hear that Jim's gone missing? You know, the young bloke that bought ya in?"

Now this put Loona on the spot, a hint of anxiety beginning to arise within her; not because she was afraid, but because Loona knew exactly where Jim was — that he was alive and well, and

heading towards his homestead as she spoke. Loona was under enough pressure already, and now she would have to conjure up a convincing lie? Goddammit. No matter, anyway; she was good at lying when she needed to.

After quickly deciding on the lie she would tell, Loona answers; “O-Oh shit, you’re kidding? What’s happened to him?”

“We don’t know,” Victor Price informs; “It’s like he’s vanished off the face of the Earth! Have you seen him by chance?”

Loona shook her head stiffly; “No, not at all. I haven’t seen him in a month, come to think of it.”

The pharmacist ran his fingers through his hair while clearing his throat; “Ahem— well, bugger. Yeah, it’s strange… Alright, I’ll leave you to it then. Stay safe out there, yeah?”

“I will,” Loona answers back before finally leaving the pharmacy, pulling the door open and stepping outside back into the cold of that otherwise fine, relaxing morning. Thankfully she had dodged a bullet in that business she had just departed from; a close call to be sure. But that didn’t matter, for Loona had managed to lie her way out of it, and now she was on the straight and narrow. With an energetic walking pace, Loona began walking further into town under the shade of the shop front verandahs, passing by complete strangers who didn’t take too much notice of her. Just as Loona continues her way northwards, the reality of the walk she was about to take suddenly hit; she would have to walk five whole miles up to some property in the middle of who-knows-where, with nothing but the clothes on her back and her phone! This provoked an inconvenienced grunt from Loona, though she knew that she had no other choice — there was no other choice. At least the directions were straight for—

“Loona? Miss Loona, can you hear me?”

Loona jumps in fright at the sudden voice echoing in her ear, causing her to swing around and confront the culprit! … Nobody was there, except a few pedestrians which had since passed her, minding their own respective businesses. Loona catches her breath from the terrible scare she had just received, just about to continue her journey… before the same voice sounds off again.

“Miss Loona, please do not panic. This isn’t the time for such visceral reactions.”

Loona's eyes widened as she recognized the voice; it was that 'messenger', Gunther, speaking to her in a disembodied voice, his accent heavy on his breath. She froze in place, completely at a loss of what to say or do. Eventually she manages to harshly whisper; "W-What the fuck?"

"I need you to listen to me for just a moment," Gunther's croaky voice instructs; "Are you listening?"

Without thinking as to what exactly she was doing, Loona nods.

Gunther's disembodied and echoey voice promptly continues; "Excellent. Be advised that there is a man dressed in a coat and hat fast approaching you. He is accompanied by a police officer. I advise that you do not resist his direction, for he will be able to assist you."

Loona's jaw became slack in mildly stressed confusion as she gasped; "W-What the fuck are you talking about?? Why is he coming for me?!"

…

No reply.

"Gunther? … G-Gunther?!"

Clak, Clak, Clak, Clak…

The sound of a pair of footsteps sound off from behind Loona, growing ever louder as they got closer and closer to her location. The disguised hellhound turns around with growing apprehension, noticing two figures fast approaching her. Sure enough, as Gunther foretold, it was a shorter Police Woman with tied-back blonde hair and a taller, older man with a mustache dressed in a black trench coat and trilby hat, the pair of them looking directly at Loona with the obvious intent to confront her.

Oh shit…

The shorter in stature police woman takes the lead as she calls out to Loona; “Excuse me, ma’am! Apologies for bothering you, but can we talk to you?”

“...S-Sure,” Loona obliges after a moment of hesitation, her eyes immediately averting to the tall man dressed in his long, dark trench coat; his dark blue eyes glaring at her like a set of harshly analytical daggers. In all honesty with herself, this man made Loona very nervous.

The police woman introduces herself; “Just be aware that this conversation is being recorded for evidence if needed. I’m Sandra Davies with the Queensland Police, we’d hope if you could cooperate and come down to the station with us. Just be aware that you’re not under any suspicion, we just wanted to ask a few questions.”

“Not under any suspicion”, my ass…

Now Loona was in some really deep shit. Out of all of the things that could’ve eventuated in this mission of hers, the absolute worst thing had just happened! Fuck knows how long this pair of morons would want to question her for! This would set Loona back to an unbearable degree, and all of the effort and trouble she had put herself through this week would all be for nothing! God-fucking-dammit, why did this have to happen now?! A bead of sweat rolled down the side of Loona’s brow as she froze in place, trying her utmost best to make a last-minute decision! Should she run away and risk having further suspicion put upon her, or should she cooperate?? … Within no time at all, Loona manages to calm herself down by some miracle, a sense of collectivity returning to her rushing mind.

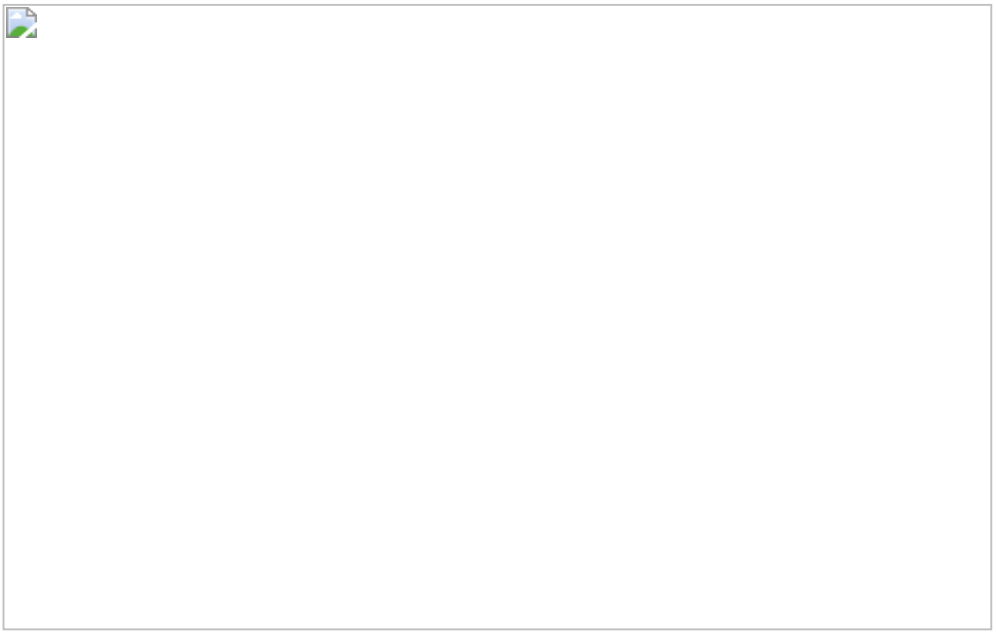
What other choice did she have?

At last, Loona spoke quietly; “...O-Okay, sure.”

Thirty-Four Hours Until The Ritual…

The Devil You Know

Hiking with a rifle slung over his right shoulder across a wide, grassy field, scattered with isolated eucalyptus trees was a figure; that figure being none other than Jim as he continued his way westwards towards his property. For the past forty-five minutes, Jim had taken to traveling the long way back to his lonesome homestead to alleviate the risk of being caught; cutting across gullies, crossing past running and dry creek beds alike, as well as maneuvering through pockets of accumulated coolabah trees for temporary shelter away from the sun. Luckily for the lone bushman, the weather was perfect for a long hike such as the one Jim was currently partaking in, the sun providing a continuous pleasant warmth which thankfully didn't make him sweat, with any heat being countered by the mild cold which hung over the sun-scorched land.



Far off into the distance to Jim's right was the main road which he could see clearly from the slight hill he now stood upon, and perched atop this hill was an old and massive gum tree, isolated away from the rest of the world — much like the young man standing under its plentiful, soothing shade. For a brief moment in time, Jim stood pensively and looked out towards the main road off in the distance, observing as a large livestock truck barrels down the two-laned asphalt highway, heading eastwards towards Morrisvale. Two other vehicles — this time in the form of a four-wheel-drive and a sedan — sped off in the opposite direction, heading off to some other destination which was completely unbeknownst to the lone observer. This was a scene which Jim was all too familiar with; in fact, he had seen it many times from the boundaries of his property when his life was nothing but blissfully mundane. But no matter how much Jim yearned for the return of that mundanity and peace, it seemed as though those days were long gone, with his life now being turned into that of a traveling nomad, armed with a rifle which was far older than himself; like a partisan, resisting against a force much larger than himself.

"Dear Lord, please give me strength…" Jim solemnly mumbled to himself, taking a deep breath before continuing on his journey, out of the cooling shade of the ancient coolabah tree. As Jim looked directly ahead, he could see that he was slowly yet surely approaching his pleasantly

isolated homestead perched atop a slight hill, the brownish-red tin roof unmistakeable which peeked out just over the large accumulation of trees on the property's eastern side. Oh, how hope-inspiring this sight was, rousing within Jim a newfound sense of energy — after so much time away, home was now well within arm's reach. Each and every step he took in the north-westerly direction towards that thicket of tall, white-barked trees felt like another foot closer to liberation, as though the weight of the world was being alleviated with the promise of finally returning home, even if it was just for an hour.

Eventually after walking tirelessly through the open grassy field, Jim makes it to the boundaries of the treeline, entering into the dense patch of woodland without a second thought. The land began ascending into a slight upward gradient, marking the beginning of the final relieving home stretch, albeit cluttered with tall and spindly tree trunks which Jim had to maneuver around, each step he took crunching the fallen leaves and twigs which cluttered the earth. Every second that ticked by felt like one whole minute to Jim, his throat tightening with a feeling of bittersweet relief as he continued his ascent up the tree-caked hill, looking forward to seeing his dear old homestead again. After five whole minutes of weaving tirelessly through the woodlands, Jim began to faintly make out the sweetly familiar off-white exterior walls of his house where the treeline ended, as well as the timber railings of the verandah which stretched around the front and sides.

The sight of his home causes Jim to pick up the pace in his walking which had grown sluggish, his step turning into a brisk walk, then into a light jog in a bid to break out of the almost oppressive trees surrounding him on all sides, like a cage made of branches. Each harrowing, long-arching sprint felt like a desperate run towards a quickly waning opportunity of much needed respite; an opportunity when once gone, might very well never come again for as long as he lived! Finally after much running, Jim clears the treeline with a sudden stagger in his step, managing to catch himself and slide to a stop before he could run face-first into the barbed-wire perimeter fence! Bated gasps filled the air as Jim caught his breath from his sprinting as if he had just run a marathon, letting out a wheezing cough from the cold and bitey wind which stung his throat. The exhausted young man staggers over to a nearby fence post which he uses to prop himself upright, finally taking the opportunity to take a good look at the home which he had missed so dearly. There it was; his beloved decades-old homestead standing right in front of him, just as real and sure as the grass which grew beneath his feet and the ever-present sun which loomed above him in the sky. Jim was home.

A potent sense of melancholic catharsis arose within Jim when he jumped over the perimeter fence, landing perfectly on his feet and striding deliberately to the entrance steps to the verandah. At that moment, Jim wasn't entirely sure what to feel. Relieved? Sad? Cathartic? Truly there was no obvious answer in that instance, but in the end it didn't matter; he was home and that's all that mattered, even if it was just for a few short minutes. An invasive part of Jim's thoughts wondered if this would be the final time he would be here. This thought in turn made the lone bushman lightly grimace in fear, wondering if his fate was going to materialize sooner than he expected — silently, he hoped to God that this wouldn't be the case. Each step up to the verandah landing creaked under Jim's weight as he ascended up each individual hardwood step, finally making contact with the deck and sauntering carefully towards the all too familiar green front door. Jim stops just in front of the entrance to his house, glaring down at the brass door handle as he freezes in place, observing it

as if it was the most interesting thing in the world. Indecision plagued Jim's mind as he began debating whether or not he should turn the handle in fear that he would discover it to be locked. This moment of inaction lasted for no more than ten seconds, with Jim ultimately realizing that he had no time to lose, his weary hand grabbing the handle with a firm grip before turning it downwards, only to find… only to find that it was unlocked.

Jim almost couldn't believe it, having to double-take with himself to make sure that this wasn't some kind of hallucination brought about by wishful thinking. In spite of this second-guessing assumption, the stinging coldness of the handle still firmly in his grip convinced him that the unlocked state of the door was an actuality. Jim proceeds to push the door inwards which allows the light of the outside world to pour into the entrance hallway, revealing to the owner the state that his house was in. Barring from the numbered yellow marker which stood in the center of the hallway and Loona's dirt-covered paw prints which led off into the living room, the state that Jim found his house in was exactly how he remembered it last, almost as if he had never left — as if the entire ordeal that Jim had gone through was nothing else but a surreal fever dream. Upon setting foot through the doorway, an instant sensation of near incomprehensible tranquility made itself known to Jim, the potency of which made the young man wonder if it was heavenly in its origin. Not once did this feeling of overwhelming peace subside as Jim wandered further into the hallway and down towards the living room, making Jim wonder further if someone had gone and 'blessed' his house while he was gone; a gesture which, in all honesty, he appreciated wholeheartedly. With a deliberately slow and cautious saunter, Jim turns his head to the right where his antique display cabinet stood, finding to his surprise and relief that his Lee Enfield was still present, still resting against the back of the cabinet in the horizontal position. Jim acknowledges his rifle's presence, though deciding that he would retrieve it on his way out, the burden of holstering Loona's rifle over his shoulder greatly influencing this decision.

Walking through the wide doorway through to the living room reveals to Jim the aftermath to a scene of pure pandemonium — one which he was a significant part of. Still stained on the varnished timber floor in small black droplets were patches of Jim's own blood, splattered haphazardly on the ground in front of the old brick fireplace where his shattered flat-screen TV stood, the screen indented from the impact of that awful day. Then suddenly all at once, memories of that harrowing day began to flood back to Jim — the knock on the door; the three masked men that stood there with pistols in their hands; the way they cornered him back into the living room; the deafening shots that were fired in his attempt to resist the intrusion; the sharp pain he felt from both the bullets piercing his abdomen and the way his back pummeled into the flat-screen TV, shattering the screen upon impact. Though Jim remembered all of this with almost photographic accuracy, he still could not remember what was said; it was almost as if Jim's mind was purposefully preventing him from remembering the fierce exchange of words that were spoken, trying its best to block out the trauma.

Perhaps it was for the best.

Jim turns his attention to the light being casted through the windows off to his right, the warm sun rays being casted through the glass in the form of long, arching beams of light. In these rays of light were minuscule specks of dust floating sluggishly through the air in haphazard and random directions — It was as if they were dancing a slow waltz in that natural and warm spotlight, performing a routine for nobody in particular.

It looked all so peaceful.

Jim blinks rapidly in reaction to something reflecting on the coffee table. He shifts his attention to the mystery object in question, squinting his eyes in a bid to block out the momentary blinding reflection. Upon recognising the object which rested upright on the coffee table, his eyes slowly widened with surprise and curiosity; it was a small, metal storage box with its lid wide open, and resting on the bottom was a VHS tape. But this wasn't just some ordinary VHS tape, rather one which Jim recognised almost instantly. Crudely scribbled on the front of the tape in question was a title:

"Mr. Colburn's Horses — 05/05/2015"

A feeling of bittersweet nostalgia appeared as Jim read this simple title, causing his jaw to fall slack with his mouth slightly agape, another bout of memories flooding back almost instantly. Jonathan Colburn — or 'Mister Colburn', as Jim used to call him when he was a child — before succumbing to old age in twenty-seventeen, was a local mechanic and horse breeder who owned a property just on the western-side outskirts of Morrisvale — not too far from where Jim currently lived. 'Mister Colburn's' sizable property consisted of a large swathe of open grassy fields which were sectioned off by old-fashioned timber fencing, and within these fields is where he kept his magnificent, elegant mares and stallions. Now usually 'Mister Colburn' was vehemently against anyone going near his horses after an apparent poisoning of one of his mares; though a softer side to him did allow for a certain pair of siblings from the Steele Family to come around and feed them, on the strict condition that they wouldn't venture further than the perimeter fence along the main road.

This is a rule that a certain Jim and Madeline Steele made sure to follow down to a tee.

"Oh Christ…" Jim uttered softly to himself, before reaching into the metal box and pulling out the VHS tape. The rectangular frame felt cold and dusty in his hands, prompting Jim to dust it off lightly in order to make it look somewhat presentable to his own eyes. For whatever reason, the young bushman felt compelled to play this physical embodiment of a memento, as if playing it would bring him a sufficient form of comfort in these truly trying times. Though he wanted to bring back a memory of far more simpler, happier times, a part of Jim still recognized that there may not be time for such pleasantries. … But what harm would a few minutes of reminiscing cause? Surely Jim could spare at most ten minutes, couldn't he?

Jim looks back up from the VHS tape in his hands and towards the smashed-up flat screen TV, finally making his decision. With this prompt to act, Jim walks over to the TV and kneels down, looking downwards into the entertainment unit where a VCR Player sat dormant in the top shelf. A small red light in the center of the 'on/off' button signaled to Jim that the rectangular metallic device had power, thus prompting him to insert the VHS into its designated slot. The lone bushman pushes it in only one-third of the way which is enough for the pulling mechanism to kick in, prompting the VHS tape to be pulled all the way in automatically. A soft mechanical whirring arises from within the antique video player, the device taking a moment to process the contents of the newly inserted VHS tape. Jim takes this as an opportunity to turn his wrecked television on so that at least the audio of the video could be played, as any possibility of the video turning up on the splintered screen was next to none. In no time at all, the VCR player finalized processing the VHS contained within it, proceeding to play the audio through a set of speakers positioned on either side of the TV. Jim stood upright, staring blankly into space as he listened in…

…

"Come on, Jimmy, hurry up! H-He's going to run away!"

"Okay, okay, Maddie! I'm coming, just— I-I'm trying to set this dumb camera up. How does dad set this up again…? … O-Oh wait, it's recording! It's recording, Maddie!"

"Alright, then get your butt over here!"

"Heheh! Don't let mum hear you talking like that! … Alright, alright, I'm here. S-So just this horse there?"

"Yeah, that one! Oh my gosh, he-he's so pretty… I-I wanna pet him!"

"Well why don't you, Maddie?"

"I don't know, Jimmy… What if he bites me??"

"Mmm… I don't think he will. Look, he's coming over to see us!"

“Oh my gosh, is he? … Oh, he is… Oh my— he is! H-He’s coming over, Jimmy, film him! Do you think he’s friendly??”

“He has to be if he’s trotting towards us like that. … Wow, he’s got a nice coat… go on, Maddie, pet him! I’m filming.”

“Mmm… O-Okay. … Oh my— h-he’s letting me pet him, Jimmy! Look, he’s letting me!”

“I’m looking! Look at that, he loves you, Mads.”

“Oh my gosh, you really think so? H-He does, doesn’t he?? Hey there, horsie… hi… Oh, you’re such a good boy. … W-We don’t have any food for him, do we?”

“Ah bugger, I don’t think so. I think I left it at home, sorry. We can always come back tomorrow and feed him!”

“Y-You promise??”

“Yeah, of course I promise!”

“Okay! You better, o-or I’ll tell mum about how you cleaned up that spilt olive oil with her tea towel!”

“Jeez! One with the threats today, are ya?”

“HEHE— Yup! … Thank you so much for this, Jimmy.”

“That’s okay, Maddie. I’ll always be here for you, yeah? You’re a great little sister.”

“Thank you! Y-You’re a great big brother, too.”

…

The audio abruptly cuts out as the tape ends, the soft static sound of white noise from the speakers quickly replacing the young voices of both Jim and Madeline Steele. Though no video was displayed on the now defunct television screen, Jim could still picture that blissfully sweet memory in full from the top of his head. He remembered the way the air felt especially cold and bitey that morning, how his breath came out in soft, white puffs every time he breathed out. He remembered the fluffy green coat and matching beanie that his little sister was wearing, and the woolen gloves she wore as she pet that tall, brown and white stallion. Jim remembered it all, especially the one thing which caused his eyes to become misty as he recollected it; just how happy they both were, living in that wholesome, serene moment.

A soft, sad smile spread weakly across Jim’s face as his lip trembled, a feeling of bittersweetness overcoming his already weary mind. That awful disease had taken such a significant part of his family away from him, and there was nothing he could do to bring her back. Grief is a powerful force to be reckoned with, and one which could go either way for someone experiencing it. For some, grief can drive someone to the edge of insanity and mental pandemonium, to the point where their lives are no longer functional. For others, however, grief can also be a motivator for someone to keep on going in life; to struggle on, and live for those someone has lost. Luckily for Jim, his own encounter with grief has the latter effect on his life. On the day that the news broke that Madeline had succumbed to her sudden illness, the young teenager growing into a man made a solemn vow to himself; that he would make something out of himself, to make himself into a better man. It was what Maddie would’ve wanted from him.

As Jim bent down to grab the now ejected VHS which was poking halfway out of the slot, he froze. Now Jim initially wasn’t entirely sure as to why he froze where he stood, only that a sudden mysterious feeling had made itself known to him at the last second. Making matters even more peculiar — if not mildly concerning — was the fact that this new, unexpected feeling felt ominous in its nature, as if the cause meant harm unto him. Jim took a moment to focus on the feeling as a deafening silence filled the room, trying to decipher what exactly this feeling was. Eventually after a tense few seconds, Jim was able to figure out what this ‘feeling’ exactly was — it was the feeling of being watched. … But from wh—

“Jimmy?”

A masculine voice softly calls Jim’s name from behind him, causing the young bushman’s eyes to widen. Without thinking what he was doing, Jim spins around towards the entrance to the hallway to confront the intruder. … It was his brother, Paul.

Jim's eyes squint with bafflement; "P-Paul?"

Paul stood upright and prominently in the center of the wide doorway, his arms limp on either side of his body while his face wore a look of mild puzzlement of his own, his 'Glagow Smile' scar prominent on his right cheek. Jim's older brother wore a plain dark-gray overshirt with the sleeves rolled up along with a white singlet underneath, while also sporting a pair of dark blue jeans and a pair of black laced-up work boots, while upon his head was a beige akubra hat with a black band.

The oldest sibling of the Steele Family's face lost all expression as he spoke faintly; "Jimmy…"

Jim couldn't understand it, letting out a confused huff with a half-smile, at least happy to see his brother; "Hah– Paul?! W-What the hell, Paul, I… w-what are you doing here??"

"I could ask the same for you, Jimmy," Paul remarks, his face still void of any expression; "Where've you been? I-I thought you were long dead."

Jim let out a wider grin with an uneven chuckle; "Oh Paulie, look, it's a long story! I-I've been in hiding for the past week, and I…"

…

Jim abruptly stopped speaking as he realized that Paul had something gripped in his hands, pointing towards his younger brother in a truly ominous way; it was a six-chambered pistol, aimed directly at Jim from the waist, his finger mere inches away from pulling the trigger. An awful feeling of sudden alarm emerged within Jim's mind as he looked back up towards Paul, his poker face now holding a completely new meaning to it — it was not just some blank expression, but instead a cold stare. Jim let out a nervous grin as he spoke; "Heh, woah Christ, Paulie! T-That's a gun there, yeah?"

Paul nodded softly, his expression still cold and lifeless; "Yeah… Yeah, it's a gun."

"What are we doing here, playing soldiers??" Jim asks, trying to make light of the situation in denial of what was truly happening.

“I suppose we are, Jim,” Paul coldly answers, his voice completely expressionless; “Can you put that rifle down for me?”

Jim’s smile began to fade as a bead of sweat built up on his brow — something wasn’t right; “W-What for?”

“... For our own safety, Jim. Please don’t resist. … I want to talk with you about something.”

“... What is this, Paul?”

“... Unfinished business.”

Thirty-Three Hours Until The Ritual…

Interrogation

"With Honour We Serve" — That was the motto written on the dull silver Police Badge displayed just above the doorway of the interrogation room, its lone occupant glaring up at it with a piercing, glassy stare.

For the past half hour since her "arrest", Loona had been escorted and held up within the Police Station she had passed just a short hour before, having since been detained within an interrogation room to prepare her for the process of questioning. Since being ushered into the Police Station, Loona had been questioned and searched for any weaponry or hazardous substances she might have, along with rigorous background check of any data relating to her, a few brief questions regarding if she was 'under the influence' of any substances, before finally recording her fingerprints and escorting her into the dead-silent room she sat in now. Loona couldn't help but scoff at the idea that such a rigorous process had to take place, especially for someone who was supposedly "not under any suspicion". There was no fooling Loona; she already knew there was ample suspicion about her, especially with the way that the tall man dressed in his black coat constantly analyzed her whenever she was in his direct line of sight. While it was a fact that Loona wasn't easily frightened by default, there was something so unsettling and intimidating about the middle-aged man which chilled the disguised hellhound to her very core.

Though Loona has made it a point to herself to wholeheartedly comply with the police who had since detained her, the constant urge to escape lingered just in the back of her mind so she could finally get on with why she was up in the human world in the first place. There were so many windows of opportunity for Loona to escape, and she had missed every single one in her bid to keep any unnecessary drama to a bare minimum. To make matters worse, the police officers had since confiscated her phone until further notice, only serving to annoy Loona further; a deep frustration which Loona tried her hardest to suppress, albeit with difficulty.

Ticking softly and monotonously just behind Loona's head was a bland analogue clock which hung high up on the wall, the seconds ticking slowly by as if it was taunting the lone occupant, reminding her that time was running out. "Tick… Tick… Tick… Tick," the wall clock declared almost mockingly, causing Loona growing frustration and impatience, bouncing her left leg in a

sign of her waning ability to remain patient for much longer. Loona turns her unfocused eyes upward, looking towards the rightmost corner of the room where the bland, pearl-white walls and ceiling met. Fixed to this rightmost corner was a small security camera, pointing directly at the table and chair which Loona was currently seated at, watching her every move as if the disguised hellhound was something to be studied. With a piercing gaze, Loona sneers at the camera and inconspicuously flips it off with her middle finger hidden under the table, taking the opportunity to defy the authority currently withholding her from her mission.

At last Loona's ability to sit still had been exhausted, with her interrogators still nowhere to be seen. Loona pushes herself away from the table which allows her to get up from her uncomfortable steel and plastic chair, adjusting her jacket before deciding to creep towards the door. Upon reaching the door, Loona presses her ear against it, listening out for any hints of movement and activity just outside. Just beyond the boundaries of the room was the faint buzzing of the lightbulbs embedded in the ceiling, along with the sound of distant chatter somewhere in the distance which sounded like business as usual; or at least as much business as there could be in a country town such as this. The muffled, dull clacking sound of boots making ground across the floor passed by Loona's designated room, fading off as the culprit of the noise went on with their day, obviously not bothering to pay the interrogation room any mind.

"For fuck sakes, what's taking them so long?" Loona growls quietly to herself, her patience just about up as she continues listening outwards into the rest of the police station. Just as Loona was about to pull away from the door, the sound of a pair of footsteps began to emerge from the stillness, along with the sound of two men invested in conversation. It didn't take long for the room's sole occupant to realize that they were talking about her, their voices muffled yet intelligible as their footsteps got ever closer to the door:

"I know you're technically leading this investigation, Vasily, but I'll be the one asking the questions here. This has to be orderly."

"Don't talk to me about 'orderly', Mr. Winslow, I've done this for twenty-five years."

"As you've told me. Look, you'll get your time to ask questions here, but the law is that we have to lead it."

This was Loona's cue to swiftly hurry back to her seat, doing so in a manner which was as quiet and inconspicuous as possible to avoid arousing any more suspicion of her intentions. Shortly after Loona sat herself back down behind the table, the blunt sound of the lock retracting sounds off before the door finally opens, revealing two men who invited themselves in. The leading man, obviously a police officer of some rank, was of a slender stature and build, though was slightly shorter than Loona's own height. He wore a light-blue uniform short sleeved buttoned up shirt,

tucked into a pair of black trousers and lace-up boots to match. His face was healthily thin and young in a testament to his younger age — perhaps no older than thirty — and growing around his mouth and chin was a neatly trimmed blonde goatee and mustache, his short, left-side-parted blonde hair completing the 'suave' look the officer was trying to pull off; though due to her own personal biases, Loona couldn't help but think he looked like a total jackass.

The same, however, couldn't be said about the tall and broad-shouldered man following closely behind. In direct contrast to the police officer, this tall middle-aged man who Loona had briefly met face-to-face with during her arrest in the street looked cold and blunt, as if he meant business. His head was of a firm square shape with wrinkles which ran long, cavernous wrinkles down his aging face, his thick-bristled mustache and slightly receding hairline strewn with growing strips of gray in a sign of his years of living. His jaw was locked shut and his lips pressed together in a reserved, unforgiving way which was complimented with his analytical dark blue eyes which stared at Loona uncompromisingly like a set of daggers. The middle-aged man's clothing choice only served to make him look even more intimidating and a force to be reckoned with; a long black trench coat and a pair of black suit trousers, his polished shoes shining in the overhanging light of the room. Once more Loona's nerves ran cold as she gazed wearily back at him, though trying to hide her reservations about him so as not to show signs of weakness.

The police officer pulled out the two chairs directly across from Loona as the trench-coated man closed the door behind him, linking back up with his counterpart and sitting down beside him in complete silence. Once everyone was settled in their seats, the blonde-haired police officer began to speak; "Good morning, ma'am, how are we?"

Loona initially did not answer, merely glaring at the officer with a cold stare before grunting; "I'm fine."

A rigid nod was the policeman's way of responding to Loona's bluntness in kind; "Wonderful," he says without any emotion, before proceeding to introduce himself; "Well thank you for cooperating with us so far and for your patience with us. I'm Constable Fred Winslow with the Queensland Police, and to my left here is Private Investigator, Mister Vasily Antonov. We'll be asking you a couple of questions relating to a disappearance which has occurred within the past week or so. From this point forward, anything you say here today may be used against you if things do eventuate further."

"Sounds good to me," Loona states with a hint of thinly-veiled sarcasm.

"Excellent," the police officer remarked as he turned to the reserved man to his immediate left; "Mister Antonov, would you like to add anything?"

For the briefest of moments, the private investigator breaks his gaze away from Loona to look towards his counterpart, staring at him before looking back to their captive and replying with; “Nyet. Do proceed.”

When he had stepped through the door a few short seconds ago, the police officer was carrying with him a stack of papers, one of the documents being that of a list of questions which had been prepared in advance. The younger gentleman shuffled the paper by delicately patting it vertically against the desk before clearing his throat, preparing to get this proverbial “show” on the road. With a set of analytical and attentive eyes, the interrogator by the surname of ‘Winslow’ asks his first question; “So ma’am, for context, for over twelve days to the date, we have been searching for a gentleman by the name of ‘James Steele’, who was reported missing at circa ten-hundred hours by his employer. From multiple eye-witness testimonies which we have gathered by asking through the community, we have found that you have been seen with him and perhaps know Mister Steele to a certain level — is this correct?”

Loona nods rigidly, maintaining her stoic posture and take-no-bullshit attitude; “Yeah, I know him. What’s it to you?”

“We just want to make sure,” Constable Winslow states calmly; “How well do you know him?”

“Well enough to be considered a friend of mine,” Loona responds calmly, not wanting to say more than she needed to — or at least more than what she personally deemed necessary.

The constable let out an acknowledging grunt behind his momentarily pursed lips, averting his eyes back down towards the slip of paper held in his hands. Loona turns her eyes away from the uniformed officer and towards the gloomily-dressed Private Investigator, returning the cold and critical stare that he was still giving the disguised hellhound. There was something so intimidating and powerful about that Russian man’s dark blue eyes, the way they pierced into her very being like a hot knife through butter — or, perhaps more appropriately as a simile, a Cossack’s Shashka cutting swiftly through the flesh of his enemy.

Without further ado, the next question is delivered; “Although numerous people have confessed to seeing you before with the aforementioned Mister Steele, they weren’t able to specify approximate times when you were last seen with him. Can you recall the last time you saw him, and when that was?”

Although Loona thought this to be a rather pointless and very intrusive question which was beyond her comfort zone, she forced herself to respond — albeit with a lie; “U-Uh… Oh shit, you’ve really put me on the spot here. I last saw him around… two weeks to a month ago now? We were just hanging out together for, like, two days at most.” Throughout the duration of her answer, Loona managed to keep a straight and unsuspecting face to make her answer seem as genuine as possible. This hastily-crafted lie seemed to perform as well as intended, with Constable Winslow nodding slowly and intently while taking it all in — The same, however, couldn’t be said about ‘Mister Antonov’. Now, it wasn’t as if Loona could tell that she didn’t have the man of many years convinced of her hastily put together lie, it was the fact that she couldn’t. The Russian man’s face was completely void of changing expression, his face as cold as a stone. Throughout this entire face-to-face encounter, ‘Mister Antonov’s’ emotions and convictions about her were completely veiled in an engulfing veil of indifferent professionalism.

Like clockwork, the next question was read out; “So when you last saw Mister Steele, did you observe any form of odd and out-of-the-ordinary behavior from him? As in, was he nervous, skittish, watching behind his back?”

Loona shrugs as she gently shakes her head; “No, not at all. He was perfectly fine when I last saw him.” That was all that the disguised hellhound answered with, and nothing more, planning to completely refuse to elaborate if she was asked. Luckily for her, it seemed as if the Constable, and less so the Private Investigator, took it in their stride to be a legitimate testimony.

The fourth question is put upon Loona shortly after, with Constable Winslow clearing his throat before inquiring; “Although we appreciate that this could be a completely wild guess, would you by chance have any idea where Mister Steele could be, and who may have taken him?”

Loona faked a convincing scoff as if she was baffled by the notion; “What? How the hell could I possibly know where he is?? Of course I don’t!”

“You’re lying.”

For the first time throughout this rigid and growingly tedious questionnaire-esque interrogation, Vasily Antonov interjected with his gruff, deep, and prominent voice, hitting the airwaves like a falling thousand-tonne anvil. Loona’s eyes widened with mild shock as she glared towards the Private Investigator, temporarily stunned by his blunt and callous verdict.

Quite understandably, especially with such a blatantly serious accusation, Constable Winslow interjected; “M-Mister Antonov? Mate, you can’t just say—”

“I can’t state the truth now?” Vasily rhetorically asks with his cold, indifferent voice, lightly gesturing his hand towards a still stunned Loona while looking to the accompanying police officer; “She is lying; I know it, and you know it. Don’t let her play you like a fool.” Vasily Antonov turns his striking deep blue eyes back towards Loona; “I am taking over questions now, young lady. Let it be known that I will get the truth out of you, whether you like it or not. Now is not time for negotiation or little games.”

What the fuck?? Who the hell was HE to speak to her like this?! The fucking nerve on this prick!

Loona couldn’t help but feel beyond insulted, a simmering mixture of anger and anxiety heating up within her as her face grew slightly more tense. Usually by this point in any other situation, Loona would’ve attacked who she deemed the antagonizer and would beat them into a literal pulp with no consideration for the consequences — but alas, nothing about this situation was anywhere in the ordinary. At least for the moment, Loona was able to keep her none-the-wiser demeanor intact, although the cracks were beginning to show one-by-one as the interrogation continued.

Having since openly declared himself the new master of the interrogation taking place, Mister Antonov bought out from a simple beige folder kept beside him a print out of what appeared to be a still image from a CCTV Camera. Without any delay, the middle-aged man bluntly smacked it onto the surface of the table and spun it around for Loona to view. At first, Loona didn’t immediately recognise what exactly the still was supposed to be of, but as it slid closer, her stomach dropped with a dreadful realization; it was a still image of herself, just about to walk through the doors of ‘The Lord Dunwich Hotel’.

Holy shit…

Mister Antonov bluntly delivers the next question; “I warn you only once; answer truthfully. This is a security footage still image taken from a bar in the township of Buckland, New South Wales. This was taken at approximately ten-fifteen in the morning, showing an individual who matches your exact description. Do tell me truthfully, for telling the truth will help your situation; is this you?”

…

“…Yes,” Loona finally forces herself to answer, confirming the Private Investigator’s suspicions with a begrudgingly compliant and restrained voice. There was no mistaking it; Loona wholeheartedly knew that admitting she was the one captured on that security footage would only

worsen the two men's suspicions on their captive, but what other choice did she have? It wasn't as if there was an easy way out of this! A pessimistic part of her wondered if there was even a way out in the first place, that this would be where her mission ended before it even had the chance to start.

It seemed as though this was the answer that Mister Antonov was looking for, his stern pursed-lipped scowl softening in its intensity and his posture relaxing, slumping back in the chair he sat within. This tall, broad-shouldered monolith of a man shifted his eyes to the right towards Constable Winslow, the pair of them meeting eyes before returning their gazes to an increasingly edgy Loona. After a few seconds of silence which felt painfully to Loona like a whole grueling minute, the next pressing question is put upon her by the imposing Russian; "According to eyewitness testimony in Buckland, an individual saw you in the churchyard an hour later, sitting alongside a gentleman who fits Mister Steele's description. The eyewitness claimed that Mister Steele seemed in good spirits and appeared calm in your presence. Is this true? Was Mister Steele with you?"

In spite of Loona's bland and straight-faced expression, a singular bead of nervous sweat rolled down the side of her left temple. Those eyes... Those goddamn cold and glassy piercing eyes! They kept stabbing right into her very being, picking at her like a vulture to the flesh of a corpse! The constant pressure was finally starting to get to Loona, her calm and unsuspecting facade cracking further and further, threatening to shatter like a lightbulb at a moment's notice! Loona had made it a point to herself to lie for her own and Jim's sake in situations exactly like this, so as to avoid any outside interference in their plans — but for how long could Loona lie, especially with someone as forceful and demanding such as the Private Investigator sat directly across from her?

Time was running out, and Loona was quickly running out of options to make her escape. She felt utterly and hopelessly cornered, and she disliked it — no… she didn't dislike it… she HATED it. Loona hated this room, hated the invasive questions, and most of all, absolutely hated this self-important 'Mister Antonov' who wouldn't back the fuck off with his idiotic questions and his stupid, accusing eyes! When Loona starts to hate… she gets defensive and snarky — and so, that's exactly what she did.

With an emerging sneer appearing on her lips, Loona stabs Antonov with a growing vitriolic look in her eyes; "You know what, Basil? Or whatever the hell your name is, frankly I don't care… Let me ask you a question this time. Who the ever-loving fuck are you to violate me with these dumb, pointless questions of yours?"

Bad choice of words, Loona, bad choice of words…

Mister Antonov cocks his head towards Loona, craning his neck stiffly forward while squinting his eyes in utter disbelief of her blatantly rude question. He speaks in a growling tone, like a bear

poised to attack at any moment; “I beg your pardon?”

Constable Winslow attempts an intervention; “Ma’am, it’s best that you don’t speak to him that wa—”

“You heard me, you old bastard!” Loona barks right back at the Private Investigator, ignoring the constable as her patience completely and finally ran out; “What’s the big idea here, pulling me off the street and accusing me of all kinds of shit? Look at you, sitting there thinking you’re all high and mighty, interrogating me as if I’m some criminal!”

Vasily Antonov’s eyes widened with a simmering anger which was threatening to boil over, his jaw locked shut and his left eye twitching ever-so-slightly. Loona immediately recognized that she was getting to him, but frankly she didn’t care — it was too late to back down now. She continues with her spontaneous rant; “Let me set one thing straight with you, old man; I don’t know where Jim is, I don’t know what’s happened to him, and most importantly, I AM NOT responsible for his disapp—”

SLAM!!!

Loona jumps out of her skin with a tremendous fright as Vasily Antonov’s balled fist slams on top of the desk with brute force, causing her to immediately shut up! Loona’s eyes widen with paralyzing surprise as she looks upwards towards the Russian now standing up, practically towering over his captive like a threatening, imposing, and viscous beast! Truly, Loona had managed to send the formerly reserved middle-aged man into a furious, seething rage, and frankly she was quickly starting to regret it.

“KAK TY SMEYESH’?!” Vasily bellows deafeningly, gritting his teeth together towards Loona; “HOW DARE YOU SPEAK LIKE THAT TO ME?! I am trying my hardest to find a man who is either dead or alive, with his mother physically sick with worry, and you DARE TO GIVE ME THIS DISRESPECT?! TY ZHALOK!!”

Loona sat completely still and paralyzed, her eyes wide with fear as she gazed up towards the imposing figure! Through her stunned silence, a completely foreign and strange sense of familiarity began to emerge within her mind — that bellowing voice… Loona could’ve sworn she had heard it somewhere before, but from where…?

After this sudden outburst of hair-raising fury, Mister Antonov winces and presses his left temple with the palm of his hand, the stress outwardly evident to have finally gotten to him. The towering Private Investigator let out a low, guttural groan of discomfort before turning to address Constable Winslow who sat adjacent to him; “I’ll step outside for a minute. We adjourn the interrogation here… as for you, young lady — I’ve got eye on you. If you think you’re coming out of this unscathed, you’ll be very disappointed; I’ll make sure of that.” That was Mister Antonov’s final word before he sluggishly spun around and walked straight out the door, with a mildly stunned Constable Winslow following suit, shutting the door behind himself as he went out.

Once more, Loona was alone.

“…RaaaAAAGH!!” Loona growls with ferocity, letting out all of her built-up frustration and anger on the table by slamming her fist into it! As was her usual instinct, Loona felt extremely compelled to throw the chair she sat in across the room; a decision which she decided against at the very last second, not wanting to cause more of a scene than there already was. Though she was still seeing vibrant and blinding red and the temptation to escape was at its utmost peak, Loona manages to restrain herself from doing anything rash, instead slumping back into her chair and burying her face into her hands.

This was great, just great! Exactly what Loona needed! In fact, no, this was fine! Loona LOVED being held firmly against her will by a hot-headed Russian, and some jackass with the stupidest facial hair Loona had ever seen so they could ask her their stupid, pointless questions! Meanwhile, time’s running out for Loona to stop Malloy and his black magic bullshit, and Jim’s currently out there hiking through who-the-fuck-knows-where to get to…

…

Before Loona could finish her thought, a strange feeling suddenly arose upon mentioning Jim’s name. It was an odd, alien sensation, and one which made Loona deeply uncomfortable, considering the fact that whatever this feeling was felt as if it wasn’t one of her own. In a sense, it felt as though she had been possessed, and the possessor was channeling their emotions and energies through the disguised hellhound’s body by a means of advanced, intricate telekinesis. Accompanying this uncanny emerging feeling was the “sound” of a disembodied voice deep within Loona’s head, as if someone or something was trying to reach out; to warn her of some present danger or to advise her on a course of action. Something told Loona in a coaxing way for her to listen carefully to this “voice”, a notion which the disguised hellhound couldn’t help but abide by. She focuses on the emerging feeling in a bid to identify what exactly it was… once Loona recognized the feeling, the hair on the back of her neck stood up with a sickeningly horrified realization, her eyes widening with a nauseating realization of her worst fears coming true…

'Wrong'. Something was going horribly *'wrong'*. It took Loona no time at all to realize who the thought was referring to…

"No… No… Nonono… ***N—.... <u>NO!!!!</u>"***

Something within Loona snaps, sending her into a burst of excruciating rage! With a look of deep murder in her eyes and her teeth gritted together with a fierce tightness, Loona leaps up from her chair and runs straight towards the door, Slamming her foot right into the door to tear the lock right out of its socket!

WHAM!!! — CRACK!!!

The lock disintegrates by the brute force of Loona's kick, allowing for the still disguised hellhound to sprint down the hallway and towards reception, her red irises glowing with rabid anger and determination! Standing in completely dumbfounded silence was Constable Winslow and Mister Antonov, watching with utter disbelief as their captive ran right past them with almost unbelievable haste, down towards reception! The Private Investigator was the first to snap out of his stunned silence, hollering an order from behind Loona as she bolts right into the reception office:

"YOU, STOP!!!"

Sitting alone and completely vulnerable to Loona's mercy was the police woman who had arrested her earlier, watching in horror as the rabidly wrathful Loona stormed mere inches right up into her face, grabbing her by the collar with brute force and snarling; "WHERE IS IT?! WHERE'S MY PHONE, BITCH?!?!"

"I-It's right here, it's right here!!" The blonde-haired officer begs as she points to Loona's phone resting face-up on the desk behind her; "Please don't kill me!!"

Loona releases her grip off the officer's collar and immediately grabs her phone, spinning right around to find Mister Antonov and two new police officers coming full-force at her! Loona wastes no time at all to react, growling ferociously as she kicks the first officer right in the stomach which sends him careening into a nearby desk, then forcefully kicking the next pursuer from behind his legs which throws him to the ground with a loud "THUD"! The disguised hellhound's third and final obstacle was an equally fierce-looking Vasily Antonov, coming right at her like a bull straight through a gate! Luckily Loona was able to outsmart the towering man, speeding right past him and

back out into the hallway, directly towards and through the wide-open exit doors, leaving every single one of her pursuers far behind her trail!

The sound of groaning and pained coughing fills the air as everyone involved tries to recover from the sporadic confrontation, each one of them coming out of it relatively and remarkably unscathed. Meanwhile, Mister Antonov storms right up to the exit doors, watching as the young woman dips and weaves in-between cars and pedestrians alike, running with remarkable speed in the westerly direction. One thing was for certain in Vasily Antonov's mind — something was certainly up with her, something… out-of-the-ordinary.

Thirty-Three Hours Until The Ritual…

A Twisted Branch

In place of where there would usually be tranquil and still peace was an awful, nauseating, utterly dead silence; the type of silence only reserved for that of the dead and the damned. The foundations of the house periodically creaked in short, subtle bursts in reaction to the icy wind that blew gracefully outside, swirling around the decades-old timber homestead in a deliberate, methodical pattern, as if it had a certain measurement of intelligence and consciousness of its own. Inside this house sat two men — two brothers — within two separate armchairs which had been pivoted to face each other, in a silent, intense stand-off. The youngest brother stares glassy-eyed at his older brother who was five years his senior, watching him intently as the six-chambered pistol sat idle in his lap, all the while the younger brother's 'Gewehr 98' was propped up on the other side of the room for "safekeeping".

No one dared to disturb this intense quiet for five whole grueling minutes — that was until Jim spoke up quietly, not once taking his thousand-yard stare off his blank-faced relative; "What are we doing here, Paul?"

Paul lets off a very faint shrug, almost eerily smooth and methodical in his movement, before speaking in an unnervingly calm tone in context of the situation at hand; "Nothing, for the moment. Just relishing this quiet, I suppose. … What are you doing?"

"Waiting for you to explain what's happening here," Jim blankly states, taking the opportunity to take his gray flat cap off his head and placing it in his lap; "Now tell me, what the hell is this? What 'business'?"

Not once did the older Steele's expression change from its seemingly indifferent, cold outward appearance, his eyes still glassy and void of any emotion outside of 'empty' and 'deadpan'. Paul procrastinated about answering for no immediately apparent reason, before finally breaking that awful, repugnant silence once more; "I don't think you'd like the answer if I told you, Jimmy, I really don't."

"Implying that I like any of what's happening," Jim refuted stern yet calmly, trying his utmost best to keep the situation cool on his side, at least for the moment; "You come into my house, threaten me with a gun to sit down unarmed, and now we're sitting around as if nothing about this is anything special. You owe me an explanation."

Paul casually shook his head, looking back up after staring down at the ground for a moment in apparent thought. He cocks his head to the side while pointing his finger towards his younger

brother; “...I’ll tell you what. If you explain to me where you’ve been for the past nearly two weeks, I’ll give you a rundown of what’s happening afterwards, yeah? How’s that sound?”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jim agrees to the terms, albeit after a moment of begrudgement; “I’m not sure if you’d believe me, though.”

For the first time in this completely out-of-the-blue situation, a hint of emotion began to emerge on Paul’s face in the form of an ever-so-faint smirk; “There’s a lot of things we can’t explain in this world, Jimmy. I reckon what you’ve got to say will be the least bizarre thing I’ve heard in a long time.”

“Alright, bet,” Jim calls his brother’s bluff, letting out a sharp, slightly prolonged sigh before spilling his secret; “I’ve been to Hell, Paul.”

Apparently Paul’s ‘bluff’ had rung some truth, with Paul’s outward appearance completely unaffected by Jim’s powerful and bold claim. It was as if the revelation meant nothing to the older brother. Paul acknowledges his younger sibling’s claim; “‘You’ve been to Hell’... Is that right?”

“That’s right,” Jim doubles down, telling nothing but the whole truth; “I’ve been to Hell and back in more ways than one. But I’ve been there, literally. It’s miserable, it's got this foul aura about it… and it’s not good, far from it. I have no intention to return.”

“That’s not our decision to make though, is it?” Paul asks in a slimy, almost mocking way, as if he pitied Jim’s optimistic wants; “If you’re damned to Hell, you’re damned to Hell, whether you like it or not. At least, that’s how I understand it. … So tell me, Jimmy, how did you end up down there?”

A brief half-smirk appeared across Jim’s face which quickly faded, giving his answer with the utmost sincerity; “Someone came to save me, Paul. Someone came to save me, and she saved my life.”

This explanation wasn’t lost on Paul, who leant gently forward in the armchair he sat within with heightened curiosity; “A woman?”

“Yeah mate, a ‘woman’,” Jim repeats with affirmation to his claim, firmly standing by what he had revealed.

"…What kind of woman?" Paul further inquired as he fell back into the comfort of his chair, becoming more and more invested in this otherwise bizarre claim.

"Well she's not a normal kind of woman, let me tell you," Jim concedes, managing to maintain his calm outward demeanor in spite of the perilous reality of the situation. He goes on to explain this 'woman's' appearance to his mildly enthused brother; "She's this mean wolf-looking thing, calls herself a 'hellhound' or something or rather, and she's got a mean temper."

Paul lets off a disbelieving chuckle with a thin smirk which briefly appeared on his lips; "Now how the hell did you befriend something like that? What've you been doing, black magic? Rituals?"

Jim waves his hand in a dismissive gesture to his brother's guesses, before elaborating to correct the assumptions; "Nah nah, nothing like that, Paul. It's funny how I met her, actually. I was repairing my fence at the entrance down the track here one morning, and I saw her emerging through the treeline across the road looking half-dead and thirsty as all hell. Anyhow she ends up passing out in that small dried-up creek bed there, and I decided to take her in, and I ended up saving her life."

"So she was returning the favour," Paul grumbles as an observation.

"Exactly," Jim confirms, slowly nodding his head as he gazes into Paul's glassy-eyed, almost sociopathic a-thousand-yard stare; "She got here in the nick of time as well. She found me, just over there, slumped beside my TV in that small pool of blood. Turns out someone put a hit on me. … Do you want to guess who that was, Paulie? I reckon you know, judging by that fucken look in your eye."

In spite of him already anticipating that this was the truth, upon witnessing his brother's face slowly turn into a mean look of what appeared to be a mixture of wrath, and intent to harm made Jim's blood run icy cold; even colder than the piercing wind which swirled, and whistled outside like a brood of ghosts. It was obvious that Paul knew that Jim knew, and the game was up. With a growing ominous look of murder in his eye, the oldest son of the Steele Family once more began to speak, albeit in a growling manner; "You know about that, do ya? So who told you, your… 'dog-woman' friend?"

"It took us a while, but we both figured it out eventually," Jim reveals without any hesitancy; "But she was the one that found out that I was chosen to die for Victor Malloy's little ritual. So tell me,

Paulie… who chose for me to die?"

…

"…Let me ask you something, Jimmy," Paul finally speaks up after a short bout of intense silence; "Do you remember someone by the name of 'Jack Foster'?"

And there it was again. That foreign, mysterious feeling of familiarity to a name Jim could swear he had heard somewhere before. That name… why was it so familiar? It seemed as if Jim was just about to find out why. The young bushman stares intently at his eerily blank-faced brother and promptly asks; "Not particularly. I think I've heard the name before, somewhere. Why?"

Paul readjusts within his seat to correct his posture, giving himself some time to decide how to phrase his answer. It didn't take long for Jim's long-standing question to finally be satisfied with an explanation; "Remember when we bought this house for ya on your eighteenth birthday? It was mum and dad's idea, as you know, and they asked me as your brother to help fix it up and make it livable. You remember how this place was, yeah? How dilapidated and shithouse it all was? Now back then, I had quite a bit of money on me to splash around, so I hired this bloke I knew who I met at the 'Coachman's Inn Hotel' in town. He was a chippie, you know, had this slight pot-gut to him and this gray-muzzled goatee, told me that he was 'reliable' and would help me get the things I needed for this homestead. Now, I don't know how the fuck he knew that I was renovating this house before I even told him anything, but hey; this is a relatively large country town, I suppose word travels quick. He brings me outside to his car and pulls out this print-out of a "builder's contract" and a pen, tells me with this… oddly stern look on his face to sign it, saying that if I did, it would 'secure my position'. I didn't know what he meant by that at the time, but eventually I found out… I'll get to that."

"Anyhow he got to work the very next day. You were inside in what's now your bedroom, chippin' off the old paintwork and such, so you didn't see him — but I'm sure you did hear him. He comes around with this ute he hired with a whole assortment of timber, tools, screws, and other shit to help us renovate this old place. He said nothing to me for the entire time he loaded it all off and placed it on the verandah outside, but as soon as he finished, just before he left, he gave me this look… and for the first time, he told me his name. … All he said to me in this hushed, sandpaper-like voice was; "Jack Foster — remember my name." … After that, he gets in his car and drives off back down the gravel and dirt track, back into town."

"Soon enough, just a week later, I realized how much of a fool I was to sign that piece-of-shit agreement. It was just a week after we had finished renovating this old place, and I was at home sitting in my front yard there. Soon enough, here comes Jack Foster and this other slightly older bloke in this green sun-scorched sedan. They pull up in front of my house and both step out,

looking directly towards me with this dull, mean, and serious look in their eyes. I stand up to meet them, but as soon as I do that, the bloke leading in front of Jack snaps his fingers at me, and tells me very emphatically to 'sit the fuck down and listen'. … So I do, 'cause who-the-hell knew what would happen to me if I didn't. So here's Jack and this new bloke staring at me in my chair, and the new bloke says; "You signed a waiver with my mate here, boy. We've come to talk to ya about some new conditions you're under." I didn't know what the fuck this old bastard was blabbering on about, so I told him that. He responds, informs that I'm now under the supervision of something called the "Dead Men Walking" or "DMW", saying that my life from now on end would be a game of playing as "Mister In-Between". … He tells me that I'm a part of this band of 'outlaws', but in a secret society sort of way, and says that I have a choice; either I work with him and he'll reward me with peace and prosperity to continue with my life, or I disobey the lifelong contract I signed and have something "taken away" from me. There was something about the look in his eye that told me to choose the first option, so I did. After doing so, this disgusting smile forms on his face and he outstretched his hand for a shake, and he introduces himself. … 'Victor Malloy'."

Jim's heart sank faster into his stomach than a millstone being plunged into the depths of the Mariana Trench. Of course by that point, he wholeheartedly expected some form of revolting explanation which would decimate his trust in his brother. Nothing, however, could've prepared Jim for the sheer whiplash he had just sustained upon realizing his own blood brother had allied himself with the very same brute who wanted him dead. The look of betrayal and vitriol that began to emerge in Jim's eyes was like nothing he had ever expressed before. Jim stares with growingly loathsome eyes towards his brother before growling with slightly bared teeth in a stern voice; "So when the fuck do I come into this, huh? When did I become a target for this horseshit? Because that's what this is, you know? Pure horseshit!"

This pressing question caused Paul to fidget in his seat, the guilty man knowing that now was the time to finally come clean; to answer as to why his very own brother, his very own blood relative, was the victim of an attempted murder. For the first time in this prolonged pseudo-confrontation, a sense of hesitation appeared within Paul's eyes as he looked back up towards his brother, forcing himself to begin explaining himself, starting with a disorientating rhetorical question; "You know I was meant to die tomorrow, Jimmy?"

"...What?" Jim squints his eyes in a mixture of disbelief and perplexion, trying his hardest to process exactly what his brother had just choked out.

"I was meant to die tomorrow," Paul chokes out once more with a restricted exacerbated sigh; "'On the fourth Monday of the Sixth Month of the year' — at least, that was according to Victor's estimates. … He told me that on the very same day that I first met him, standing right there in my front yard, saying that it would occur less than five years from then. I didn't know what the fuck he was on about, but there was something about him which made me take his word as nothing but the truth. It was like… I was tranced by him… I still am, Jimmy… I still fear him. … But you know what he says to me? He says that I wasn't the 'right kind', so he didn't want me to die. He said to me that there was another contender which his 'hosts' wanted, according to some old woman

named ‘Harriette’, and that he would trade my spot — my ‘position’ — for someone else who was closest to me, in exchange for a guarantee that my life would be out of harm’s way. … I’m sorry, Jimmy, I… I-I had to… I have a wife and kid, Jimmy, I couldn’t just leave them like that… not like that…”

“...You’re a pure shit-cunt, Paulie,” Jim growls with a look of bitter betrayal and boiling-hot anger in his eyes, raising his voice gradually; “You’ve traded my own FUCKING LIFE for VICTOR FUCKEN MALLOY?! YOU’RE A FUCKEN SHIT-CUNT!!”

This sudden vitriolic slew of red-hot anger and betrayal provoked nothing but a vapid, practically vacant look on Paul’s face, as if this Shakespearian act of betrayal that he was about to commit against his own blood relative was nothing for him to feel any remorse over. It was also by this point that Jim realized that this bizarre, surreal situation was now truly a matter of life and death, even more so as he watched with morbid apprehension as his own brother stood up from his chair with the pistol’s grip held in his right hand. With a look of pure, bone-chilling vacancy in his eyes, Paul utters his final word on the situation at play — one last statement before the pull of the trigger; “I’m sorry it had to be this way, Jimmy. … It’s just how things turn out sometimes.”

Jim watches in utter fear and helplessness for his life as the dull dark-metalled barrel of Paul’s pistol rises up to align with his eyes, the gunman preparing to shoot his own next of kin in the face. In one last act of defiance, Jim looks up to stare right into his brother’s eyes, uttering his final words; “Remember this day, Paulie. Remember me.”

“I will…” Paul slurs, staring right back with his lifeless eyes. No more than a second later, his pointer finger finally touches the trigger…

…

Click! … Click! Click!

…But the pistol fails to fire.

Jim leaps right out of his chair and buries his fist right into the side of Paul’s face with a ferocious left-hook!

THWACK!!!

"ARGH— FUCK!!" Paul hollers in pain, helpless in his position as he is tackled to the ground by Jim who had a look of fierce rage burning bright in his eyes! Jim manages to throw another disorientating punch right-square into Paul's nose, causing it to break with an audible, sickening "CRACK"!

"YOU'RE A BASTARD, PAUL! YOU'RE A FUCKEN DISGRACE!!" Jim bellows in a voice which could shatter rock like a pickaxe, only for him to be thrown right off Paul as his brother tackles him right off through a punch right in the gut! This gives Paul an opportunity to fight back, kicking his brother right in the face to temporarily discombobulate him, scurrying and staggering back onto his feet while backing himself away for a better angle to fight from! Jim manages to pick himself up from the floor in roughly the same amount of time, regaining his footing before putting his fists up, a look of murder in his eye as he challenges his brother to a fair fight; "COME ON, THEN! YOU WANT ME DEAD, CUNT?! I'M RIGHT HERE!"

Paul suddenly charges towards Jim with his own set of fists, swinging his left hook first only to miss Jim's face by mere inches! This gives Jim an opportunity to swing right back, punching his attacker with a blunt upper-cut right into his ribs, provoking a pained, hollering grunt! Paul manages to briefly gain the upper hand by smacking Jim right in his left cheek, sending the younger brother staggering backwards towards the wall adjacent to the hallway's entrance! This was bad news for Paul as Jim grabs the rifle to use the stock-end as a means of melee defense, smacking a quickly approaching Paul with a blunt "WHACK!" across his torso! With a pained bellowing wheeze, Paul falls back-first right through the doorway and onto the timber flooring of the hallway, the impact of the fall being heard with a painful, dull "THUD"!

"N—NGAH!" Paul painfully grunts as he limps slowly back up onto his feet, standing right in the frame of the hallway entrance in full view for Jim to see. The attacker's face was a complete and utter mess, almost as if it was a crude, broken, and bloodied mockery of itself. His nose had been badly broken and reduced to a bloodied mess from the sheer force of Jim's first initial punches, scarlet-red blood dripping down onto his lips and soaking in scattered blotches onto his shirt's collar. Paul's hair, too, was in a straggled and wiry mess from the sudden fight, looking more akin to the hide of a sick and dying animal than a full head of brown hair. Completing the hideous, beat-up portrait of 'Paul Steele' was the sheer maniacal look of hatred which stained his face, looking like nothing more than a hideous, vicious demon rather than a man, his eyes uncompromisingly focused on his younger brother and poised to strike at any moment!

"COME ON, PAUL! I'M RIGHT HERE!" Jim challenges once more while beating his chest with an open palm, outstretching his arms to accept the continuing fight!

Paul was just about to open his bloodied mouth to say something in return before abruptly freezing, pivoting his head to look towards the front door to his right. It was immediately apparent to Jim

that something had caught Paul's attention… something which made his face turn as white as a sheet with overwhelming fear.

Suddenly a large flash of white and dark gray swoops across the hallway, instantly dragging Paul out of sight, deeper into the house with terrifying speed! A horrified masculine scream echoes through the walls as the sound of animalistic snarling fills the air! It was soon obvious to Jim who exactly this white and dark gray mass was, the slightly bruised young man rushing out into the hallway to confront the scene which was now unfolding! Sure enough, there was Loona in all of her ferocious, terrifyingly aggressive glory, hunching over and physically restraining a clearly terrified Paul Steele, snarling and biting at him with horrific, animalistic malice! The dark-gray fur on the back of Loona's neck stood upright in a clear indication of her boiling-hot rage, her piercing scarlet-red eyes glowing with a rabid, untamed wrath like no other as her razor-sharp teeth dug into Paul's neck like a row of machete blades. With a loud, disturbing snarl, Loona begins dragging her target through the hallway and back outside onto the veranda, the hellhound almost completely ignoring Jim's presence as she staggers outside with her gutturally screaming victim.

Jim watches with a mixture of awe, anger, and relief as Loona hauls his horribly anguished brother down the steps and onto the grass, not once loosening her jaw's cast-iron grip on his neck. The glistening of hot-red blood shone in the morning sun, the blood in question completely drenched into Paul's shirt as he quickly became weaker and weaker in his futile attempts to resist. At last after being convinced that he was weak enough, Loona releases her bite from her target's neck, pinning him down in the grass and dirt with one foot firmly on his chest. The hellhound looks down upon the dying man with aggressive and piercing eyes, watching intently as her victim's beyond horrified gasps quickly turn into sickening gurgles and coughs from the blood building up in his throat. Whatever was left of Paul's face pre-confrontation was covered in deep-purple and red bruises and drenched in blood, the nauseating scent of sulfur lingering in the air. The wind whistled around Loona as if it was a church bell announcing her victim's incoming and inevitable death.

…

The last thing that the fatally wounded Paul did before the life vanished from his eyes was to look directly up at Loona through his hateful, bitter eyes, before giving her the most horrifically twisted, bloodied grin that the hellhound had ever seen in her life. If anything, this final act of futile defiance sent a disturbed chill up Loona's spine, causing her to shudder viscerally. And with that, with one last final blood-drenched rattling breath, Paul Steele was no longer of this world, leaving behind his wretched and bloodied corpse.

With her target now well and truly dead, Loona took the opportunity to catch her breath after having worked herself up at such a short moment's notice. She wipes the excess blood away from her mouth and razor-sharp teeth, the foul scent of which was causing Loona near vomit-inducing nausea, grimacing all the while until the very last stain was rid from her maw. The sound of uneasy staggering footsteps comes up from behind Loona as Jim comes over to observe the wretched body

of his brother, his shallow breath bated and full of bitter betrayal. Loona looks on with an emerging sense of pity as Jim stares down at his brother's corpse, swallowing away the sudden lump his throat before bellowing; "For fuck's sake… FOR CHRIST'S SAKE, PAULIE!! After all of those fucken years, you wanted to kill me, and for what?! You went and fucken signed my death warrant for the worst crook in town, and NOW LOOK AT YA! Gone and left your wife and kid behind now, and for what exactly, Paulie?! For WHAT?!"

Loona felt beyond terrible for the young man, holding her forearm with growing discomfort for this bloody aftermath. It had begun to dawn on Loona who exactly she had just killed, bringing about a deep sense of guilt along with this realization. In an almost ill-timed attempt at comfort, the hellhound begins to timidly express her condolences; "Fuck… Jim, I… I'm sor—…"

Midway through her condolences, Loona stops, noticing the bleak look which Jim was staring at her with; one which told her that an apology wasn't worth it, nor would it do either of them any good. Shortly after, Jim staggers his way back towards his house to rest upon the small flight of stairs leading up to the veranda, obviously in need of time to recover from the cataclysmically disturbing revelations from the past hour. Once Jim had sat himself down on the stairs, he buried his head right into the open palms of his hands, hunching himself over as he sat in complete and utter silence. From all of the time that Loona had spent with Jim, at no point before did the young man look as pitiful as he did now, causing Loona to feel absolutely terrible for him. With a careful and slow pace in her step, Loona slowly approaches the clearly overwhelmed human with a look of sympathy within her strikingly-red eyes, walking over until she was no more than a foot away.

The solemn hellhound's ears fold back in hesitation as she opens her mouth, pausing for a brief second before finally stuttering through a soft-spoken voice in an attempt to console her friend; "...Y-You okay?"

Jim says nothing, instead shaking his head slowly before raising his head up from his hands to gaze aimlessly off into the horizon of patchy browns, greens, and everything in-between. Loona noticed the look of betrayed bewilderment in his eyes which was complimented with his slack jaw, making the hellhound pity him even more than before.

Eventually, Jim finally replies to Loona properly, albeit in a slurred, repressed way as he looks up to her with depressive eyes; "No, Loona. … No, I'm not okay. … We always expected something was wrong with him, didn't figure that it was this bad."

"Who's 'we'?" Loona asks carefully, trying her hardest not to be completely upfront with the questions while maintaining a suitable, consoling tone of voice.

“Mum, dad, everyone else who knew him,” Jim elaborates solemnly, looking right into Loona’s eyes; “He was always reclusive, going out for long periods of time and getting himself involved in all sorts of shit. … Up until now, I thought it was just limited to drugs, not… not whatever-the-fuck this is.”

Loona listened intently to every single thing Jim had to say about his brother, only feeling worse and worse about the situation as the words dragged on. The hellhound fidgets before remorsefully commenting with sincerity; “Fuck, Jim, I… I-I don’t know what to say, I’m… I’m sorry.”

“What’ve you got to apologise for?” Jim asks; “You didn’t do anything, this isn’t your fault.”

“I-I know that,” Loona stammers for a moment, trying her best to correct and rephrase her ‘apology’; “I mean I’m sorry that this has happened.”

“Yeah, well… I appreciate it, thank you,” Jim thanked somberly, further emphasizing his gratitude with a soft, weary smile which disappeared as quickly as it appeared; “What’s ‘sorry’ going to do anyhow? Paul’s a psychopath and now he’s dead because of it. There’s nothing much we can do about that, what’s done is done.”

There was no truer statement relative to this god-awful situation than the one Jim had just made, prompting Loona to nod in silent agreement.

Before anything more could be said or done, Jim asks a question which had suddenly appeared; “You know this is the second time you’ve saved me from death? How’d you know I was in danger?”

Loona couldn’t help but pause on this sudden inquiry, beginning to ask herself the very same question almost word-for-word. How exactly did she know that Jim was in life-threatening danger? How did she know to escape the confines of the Police Station when she did, then to run without stopping towards this lonely homestead she stood before, only to then arrive just in time? Loona thought deeply about this, furrowing her brow with momentary silent deliberation before shrugging; “I don’t know. Just a hunch, I guess.”

“Well it’s a fucken accurate hunch, innit?” Jim chuckles dryly, periodically looking towards Loona for a few short seconds before gazing aimlessly back out into the hill, grass, and scattered tree-caked horizon. That same sad and reflective look in Jim’s eyes never wavered as he stared

outwards, breaking the silence which was about to settle once more; “Christ’s sake, what are we gonna do now?”

“We gotta keep going. That’s all we can do,” Loona solemnly states, letting out a soft sigh as she says so, proceeding to sit beside Jim in a free spot on the weathered timber steps. She maintains her steady and empathetic eye contact with Jim as she grabs his attention once more; “Hey, look at me.”

Jim does so, turning his head away from the horizon and towards the hellhound beside him to the immediate left.

“We’re gonna get through this, okay?” Loona reassures; “I promise we will. But you need to stay sane for me for this to work. Whatever-the-fuck is out there after us is trying to mess with us in any way it can. Don’t let it win by losing yourself, got it? Can you do that for me?”

“I’ll try,” Jim replies silently, nodding his head in compliance with Loona’s request; “Will you be there for me?”

“I’ll be here,” Loona reassures with a light nod of her own, lightly patting the young man’s forearm in an act of light encouragement; “Now, come on. We gotta go deal with this… body… whoa, what the hell?”

Upon diverting her eyes back towards the spot where Paul’s corpse lay in a disgusting pool of blood and viscera drenched in the soil, Loona was perturbedly baffled to find… nothing. The spot where the wicked and psychopathic man’s corpse laid upon was vacant, with no sign or trace of the body to be seen; Paul had simply disappeared. What disturbed Loona even more was the fact there was also no evidence of a bleeding corpse either, with the blood and viscera which had begun to stain the earth completely vanished along with the body. All that was left to signify a body being there was the slight roughly six-foot indentation in the grass, which swayed gracefully with the periodic winds. Both Loona and Jim stared with utter bewilderment at the scene before them — or rather, lack thereof. This moment of perturbed silence ended when Loona got up, encouraging Jim to return inside to retrieve what he had returned for his house for in the first place; his Lee Enfield — still holstered safely within the display cabinet by the entrance — and his phone which rested within his bedroom. Loona waited silently outside with her ‘Gewehr 98’ slung over her shoulder after having retrieved it from the young man, not having to wait long as Jim waltzed his way outside, across the veranda and back down the short flight of steps before asking, though bluntly and with a tired hint to his voice; “So what now?”

Loona promptly turns her head around to look off into the northerly direction, planning their route to journey to their next objective. Her analytical and plotting eyes lock into the treeline where a vast, outstretching thicket of dense bushland began, quickly determining that this was their best route to head northwards without getting caught. With a rough map planned out in her head, Loona turns back towards Jim and replies; “We’re paying someone a visit.”

Thirty-Two Hours Until The Ritual…

A Woman Scorched

"...The vault is overwhelmed with solemn wonder,

The Earth in cobalt aura sleeps,

Why do I feel so pained and troubled?
What do I harbor; hope, regrets?..."

— Alone I Set Out on The Road (1841) — Mikhail Yuryevich Lermontov (1814 – 1841)

High above both Loona and Jim's heads and crawling along the otherwise clear, blue sky was a slow but steadily growing accumulation of dark clouds which only threatened to grow further in size and density. After having walked through a dense and unforgiving swathe of dense bushland for the past forty-five minutes of the hour, both the human and hellhound had at last broken free of their flora prison-like maze, emerging on the other side on the banks of a shallow, rocky river. Directly across on the other side of this shallow river before Loona and Jim was the beginning of a large swathe of grassland, which was most likely a large grazing field, guarded by a weathered and beaten barbed wire fence which stretched continuously to both observers' left and right. Before they could venture any further, Loona took the opportunity to sit herself down in the grass, taking her rifle off her shoulder while letting out a tired grunt of momentary relief.

"Nngah! C-Christ on a stick, that was long!" Loona exclaims with a panting breath, at last giving her legs a rest after having to traverse through every bush, tree, and gully in her path.

"Better to take the long way than to get caught," Jim grumbles as he sits himself in a dirt patch beside Loona, rubbing the back of his neck to alleviate a knot which had developed. After having rid the knot from his neck, Jim retrieves a near empty bottle of rum from the depths of his oilskin coat's deep pocket, unscrewing the cap before giving himself a quick swig. As Jim swallows his minuscule yet sufficient serving of liquor, he hands the bottle over to Loona who accepts it gladly, the hellhound then tipping it almost completely vertical and taking a few gulps as her own serving, allowing for her thirst to be quenched.

Both Loona and Jim look out in unison at the large swathe of grassy field before them, finding that to their luck the entire field was barren of life, or at least within their immediate sights. For the umpteenth time, another gentle bone-chilling breeze swept across the land and through the trees, a chorus of rustling leaves and shifting branches thundering in near complete unison in reaction to

the periodic disturbance in the air. The gust of wind in question flows North-Eastwards towards what would otherwise be a completely unsuspecting dilapidated farm shed, if not for the fact that it was the exact landmark that Loona was searching for. As accurately described by Dr. Victor Price of Morrisvale, the shabby gray and rusty corrugated iron farm shed stood prominently off towards the north-east, standing off just a few feet away from the main road which headed northwards towards the city of Toowoomba. The support structure had long since collapsed after many years of withstanding Australia's many Summers and Winters, causing the corrugated iron roof to cave in around a long-since abandoned tractor which was caked with rich brown rust.

Sure enough, as Loona looked further towards the east, off into the distance on the other side of the road was a house, standing prominently like a foreboding monolith. Though the sides of the road were partially obscured by a localized collection of trees, Loona could make out the outward appearance of this reclusive, lonesome house. Unlike other houses similar to it in the area, this one especially seemed less of a 'house' and more of that akin to a low-level, weather-beaten worker's cottage. The building's overall profile and features were overall relatively small, everything from the compact red clay roof tiles, to the front-facing veranda which sat outside the entrance door, looking as if it measured no more than twenty feet across. The small timber cottage's off-white paint looked to be flaking off in large patches, exposing the wood which lay underneath which too was in a certain state of neglect. Loona intently stares at the otherwise unsuspecting worker's cottage with prying and plotting eyes, beginning to decide a 'method of approach' in her head.

"So what's the plan here?" Jim asks intently while staring off in the same direction as the hellhound, trying his hand at familiarizing himself with the reclusive residency.

"That's what I'm trying to figure out…" Loona half mumbles in response, her full attention being paid towards the fabled 'Edgecliffe' residence while continuing to weigh up her options.

As accustomed to Loona, her first and foremost instinct was to charge right in "guns-ablazing" and immediately start interrogating the decrepit old hag with a healthy dose of aggressive persuasion. This idea was quickly shot down within Loona's mind as soon as she considered this old woman's presumed age; Harriette was old, with recollections about her and her antisocial behavior going back to at least the 'Fifties', which roughly put her to at least ninety years of age. As much as Loona would love to give this rotten hag exactly what she deserves, to charge in and immediately get up in her face would most likely end in a fatal heart attack or worse. Now wasn't the time for quickly thought-out and compulsive action; now was the time for a much more careful approach.

With this in mind, Loona turns her head back towards Jim to lay out the plan with him; "Alright, listen up. I'm gonna go in and ease this bitch into what's happening. You go wait over in that farm shed, and if I need your backup, I'll yell out. Got it?"

“Sounds good to me,” Jim acknowledges the plan; “So how are you gonna do this? As in, ease her into why you’re here?”

“I’m not sure yet,” Loona admits; “I’ll introduce myself as a… uhh… fuck, I dunno. I guess a “journalist”? Seeming that everyone around here thinks I am one for some reason.”

Jim nods intently as he turns his head back towards the cottage off in the distance; “Hey, if it works. So what if she attacks ya, what then?”

“Then I guess I gotta kill her, don’t I?” Loona huffs, heaving herself up from the ground before dusting herself off from the settled dirt. After doing so, Loona grabs her rifle up from the ground and hands it over to Jim; “Here, hold this for me. I can’t go in there waving a gun at her, she’ll go nuts.”

“Aye, fair enough,” Jim cooperates while grabbing the rifle, holding it by the stock and barrel before setting it aside; “So you’re heading off there now, are ya?”

“Guess I am. It’s not like we’ve got time to waste,” Loona huffs while mentally preparing herself for the umpteenth time that day, beginning to make her way down to a shallow part of the river, preparing to cross over to the other side. Loona stops just on the very edge of the river bank where dry earth and water meet, her entire body suddenly being absorbed by a bright blue shimmering light, the hellhound reemerging no more than a second later in her human form. Before she could do anything else, Loona turns around to look back towards Jim; “You ready to go?”

“It’s either now or never,” Jim remarks as he gets back up onto his feet, hauling both rifles over his shoulder as he follows Loona across the river.

The cold, gracefully swirling water splashed with each footstep which Loona and Jim took, each lap of freshwater glistening in the sun as it was disturbed by movement. Upon stepping up onto the dryness of the opposite river bank, Loona began to change her course to the eastward direction, marching her way past a hulking coolabah tree and directly towards the main road. A lone sedan sped its way along the road in the southerly direction as Loona gave a hand signal for Jim to make a beeline towards the collapsed farm shed, the young man abiding by the order without a second thought. With a light jog about her step, Loona sprints up to the shoulder of the road and takes cover behind a large wild bush which grew underneath a towering white-barked gumtree. Just as she takes her cover behind this large accumulation of bush, another car rumbles its way along the asphalt road this time in the northern direction, with Loona waiting in place until the vehicle was completely out of sight before making her move. Now that the coast was clear, the now disguised

hellhound leaps up from behind the bush and sprints across the road, her eyes firmly locked onto the isolated diminutive homestead as she steps onto the dust-ridden pathway leading up to it.

With each individual step she took, Loona began to feel somewhat uncertain with how exactly this confrontation would go. There was something so unusually nerve-racking about approaching this house, which the disguised hellhound chalked up to having to do with how everything seemed to be going south thus far; First she was arrested, then she had to rescue Jim from a situation which would have resulted in his death, and now… this. If something went disastrously wrong with this otherwise relatively "simple" interrogation of some dying old bitch, then Loona might as well throw in the towel then and there; Let Malloy have Jim for his sacrifice, and she would return to life as normal… this was something which Loona had absolutely no intention of doing. Now the rare visitor to this otherwise unsuspecting residency was no more than ten feet away, the faded and flaky white front door staring right at her face, beckoning for her to come rap her knuckles against its structure to make herself known. Soon enough, Loona stepped up onto the veranda's weather-punished floorboards which creaked ominously under her weight, scooting straight up towards the door where her nervousness peaked momentarily. There was no turning back now… Loona took a labored breath to steady her apprehensive nerves, gaining the courage to raise her balled fist up to the door proper before knocking.

Wrap—Wrap—Wrap!

The feeble wooden structure of the door rattled loosely from each rapid knock Loona put upon it, the hinges practically threatening to fall apart from the outside physical disturbance. With her knock now delivered, Loona stepped back by a minuscule margin to await an answer, taking the opportunity to fix her hair up from the bursts of gustful winds. … That answer never came. Loona tries again, replicating the first knock with a little bit more force.

Wrap—Wrap—Wrap!

...Still nothing.

Loona was just about to knock for the third time, only to be stopped by the muffled sound of a disturbance somewhere inside. It was a small, delicately-sounding shuffle which was quieter and feebler than anything Loona had ever heard before; a type of meek sound which could easily be drowned out if the lone visitor on the veranda breathed too loudly. The wheeze of a raspy cough emanated from somewhere inside which was accompanied by the sound of light shuffling of weakened footsteps, the sound of which crept closer and closer towards the door until it stopped mere inches away. Shortly after the weak and gentle sounds of shuffling subside, the door unlocks and begins to open inwards, opening only halfway to reveal the worker's cottage's occupant.

She was old. Holy shit, was she old. So old in fact that it gave Loona a mild fright. Standing at a mere five-feet was an unbelievably thin old woman draped in a long dark-burgundy dress. Her drooping face was covered in so many cavernous wrinkles and blemishes that it made her look comparable to that of a medieval leper, or that of a corpse just before the onset of rigor-mortis. The old woman's ruffled white hair, too, looked as sickly delicate as the rest of her, though still somewhat plentiful in spite of her seemingly decades of living. Her left eye had gone completely blind with cataracts while her right eye was almost completely clear, if not for the puny red hemorrhage which was located just below her dark-brown iris. The lonely old woman's painfully boney fingers attached to an even bonier hand clutched around the rim of the door, so thin in fact that her knuckles and each individual joint was plain to see.

In a further pitiful testament to her onsetting age, the old woman finally speaks in a raspy, throaty voice; "M-May I help you?"

Loona snaps out of her stunned analysis of the old woman standing before her, proceeding to greet back in kind; "O-Oh, yeah, I hope you can. Are you Harriette? Harriette Edgecliffe?"

"Oh, that I am," the old woman croaked, her eyes full of hesitancy of her newest visitor; "What brings you around here, young lady? A-Are you perhaps lost?"

"Uhh, no, I'm not. I was actually hoping if I could speak with you," Loona went on to clarify. A puny, singular bead of nervous sweat ran down the right side of her forehead as she continued; "I'm a journalist covering some, uh… some 'things' about the town a few miles south of here, and I was told you'd be able to help me."

A lame cover story to be sure, but regardless of how genuine it seemed, it was enough to convince the frail Harriette Edgecliffe, who replied; "That's rather strange. I don't suppose I know many people who'd direct you to me for anything. But I'll be happy to help you regardless. Please, do come in!"

Huh. That was easier than expected… too easy…

And with that, the little old lady hobbled herself back around to lead Loona into the depths of her cottage, with Loona giving one last glance back towards the collapsed farm shed across the road where Jim stayed put. If anything went majorly south with this otherwise relatively "menial" task, it was Jim who Loona would need to rely on to come assist her. With this in mind, a still nervous

Loona let out a suppressed, sharp sigh, before working up the courage to follow the frail lady through the front door. The musky scent which was most associated with old houses and antiques hit the disguised hellhound's nose the instant she stepped in, the smell almost overwhelming with the feeling of 'nostalgia' it conjured. Accompanying the unmistakable musky scent of antiques was the appearance of this small house's interior, the worn-out walls decorated with decades-old photographs in black-and-white, and paintings of the Australian landscape which surrounded this humble and somewhat shabby property.

One which caught Loona's eye was a photograph which hung just below her eye-level. It was a small black-and-white photograph framed in a decorated plywood picture frame, the borders of which were painted in a fine, thin band of yellow which stretched around the entire perimeter. Contained in the gray-sepia photo itself were two figures; a young woman dressed in a stunningly white wedding dress who sat gracefully in a chair, and a tall gentleman in a black and white suit standing right behind her. What struck Loona as particularly odd about the photo were the haphazard scratch marks graffitied onto the man's face, disfiguring it to the point where the face was barely recognisable. An ugly divorce, maybe? Really it wasn't really Loona's business to find out, and nor did she actually care.

The lone visitor follows the hobbling elderly woman to the living room at the very end of the hallway located to their right. Much like the rest of this diminutive house, the living room was especially compact, with barely a few feet between every bit of furniture which populated the room. For example, pressed against the wall furthest away from Loona was a varnished oak wood antique cabinet with displays of fine china and peculiar, eye-catching pottery. No more than a few measly inches away was an old-fashioned, cast-iron heating radiator, and beside that was an even older cast-iron stove with a chimney leading high-up into the roof. To the wall off to Loona's right was a kitchen counter and pearl-white fridge; perhaps the most modern appliance in this cottage spotted thus far. Placed roughly in the center of the room and placed either side of a round varnished table were two lounge chairs facing towards a large bay window.

After letting out a weak chesty cough, the poorly-looking 'Harriette Edgecliffe' shuffled towards the felt-covered antique lounge chairs, weakly waving Loona over to join her; "Do come sit down, dear! You must've walked such a terribly long way to get out here."

"You wouldn't know the half of it," Loona responds while following the elderly woman slowly, watching cautiously as Harriette scoots her way over to the lounge chair closest to the varnished cabinet. Loona closely replicates Harriette's movement, approaching the lounge chair closest to her and preparing to sit down, though she waited until the frail homeowner sat down first in case she tried anything funny. In an attempt to keep Harriette's enthusiasm for talking maintained, Loona makes a passing comment; "It's, uh… a nice place you got here. I like the… walls?"

"Oh it is such a lovely abode," Harriette boasts with her feeble voice; "My family has been here for four generations, though I am afraid I am the last… except for my younger sister 'Julia', of course,

but she refuses to acknowledge me."

"Go figure…" Loona mutters from just under her breath, hoping that Harriette hadn't heard her demeaning comment. So as to continue the conversation, the visitor asks another question; "Do you get anyone around to see you, or…?"

"No, not anymore, dearest," Harriette sadly answers, shaking her head with a pitiful look in her one working eye; "The only person I ever see anymore is some young fellow from up Kilgowie way. He comes and delivers my groceries to me every-so-often, but rarely does he speak. Suppose he's heard about some of the… awful rumours about myself."

"Awful rumors, huh?" Loona asks, acting as though she hadn't heard the snippets that Victor Price had told her beforehand; "Like what?"

"Perhaps about my younger, more eventful years," Harriette went on to explain; "I was rarely one to be too sociable with people, and at most times I was very short to anger. I still am, to a point. My husband used to say that about me before he died, that I was a 'mean woman' and I should stop my ways of being so full of vitriol. To be frank with you, young lady, there are men out there who just do not understand us women. It's a factor of life, I suppose. Except for one, though he did pass away a month or so back now."

"Uh-huh…" Loona acknowledges bluntly in a way which vaguely displays her disinterest on the matter, watching as Harriette let out another hacking cough. She chose to point it out; "That's quite the cough you got there, Harriette."

Harriette clears her through forcefully as she nods her head; "AH–AHEM! O-Oh yes, it's such a chronic, terrible thing. I've had it for many years, and I'm not sure if I remember a time when I didn't have it. As the saying goes; 'There's no rest for the wicked'. … But that's enough about me for the moment, young lady. Now, what is it that I could help you with?"

That dreadful feeling of nervousness began to creep up to the forefront of Loona's mind once again, knowing that it was only a matter of time until she needed to get to the meat and potatoes of why she was here in the first place. Just as she began to get nervous again, Loona tried to think reasonably; Harriette Edgecliffe was an old woman, an old bag so to speak. Even if Harriette got antsy about the topic of Victor Malloy and tried to attack her, she was barely a match for the brutality which Loona could dish out against even the strongest of men. For the disguised hellhound to fight against Harriette would be as easy as swatting a fly.

With this in mind, Loona decided to go straight for it, albeit maintaining her 'none-the-wiser' charade until she found the time was right; "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. About that recent death of that guy you mentioned just before, uh… I-I was hoping to talk to you about… him."

The moment the words fell out of Loona's mouth, a look of emerging recognition formed in Harriette's one good eye, prompting the interrogator to prepare herself for whatever violent reaction this old woman might have. Though to Loona's surprise and mild relief, that form of reaction never came. Instead Harriette began to treat the topic in a rather casual fashion, as if it was nothing out of the ordinary to speak about; "Ah. I see. … Oh, a poor and lonely outcast of a man, he was. I truly wept for him, you know? I still do. He was a very sick man, much like how I am a sick woman in more ways than one. Now for the life of me, I cannot remember the exact way how we met, but when we did… When we did, there was a near instant sense of deep camaraderie between us. The two of us saw this world for how it is; cruel, inhumane, indifferent to suffering and death. For years, and years, we tried as individuals living our own separate lives to overcome that cruel, cold indifference; even if nobody understood why we acted the way we did. But alas, nothing worked. … That was until Victor discovered something — something so hauntingly beautiful… the promise of prolonged life… through the means of death. An ironic concept, to be sure."

Loona was left completely baffled throughout Harriette's tangent, stunned by the fact that she was treating this as if it was no big deal by any measure! Initially Loona chalked it up to the old woman's age, considering the possibility that perhaps her diminishing faculties had numbed her to even the most extreme of topics. She would've settled with that conclusion, if not for the fact that Harriette seemed complete and utterly genuine and lucid throughout her confession.

Loona felt uncomfortable and edgy in her chair as Harriette continued ranting; "He had discovered it through his search for immortality, for he was always afraid of death. Now, this wasn't because he was afraid of dying per se, but what would come after — Afterall, he was a man who had done many, many heinously immoral things, and for that he feared the punishment he deserved. In fact, we were both afraid of dying, and these… beings we discovered and made contact with… they were our means of escaping our just desserts. They would grant us freedom away from our judgment for our wrongdoings, in exchange for another sacrificial soul."

Just as Harriette finishes her haunting sentence, Loona feels a foreboding chill run right up her spine. Those words, those sentences, this entire goddamn confession… the way that the decrepit old hag delivered them sounded akin to that of a sinister, conniving serpent with the ability to talk, the words tumbling out through her rough old voice in such a slithering, slimy way.

In spite of the horrifying nature of what she had just put upon Loona, Harriette shifted the topic momentarily as though it was nothing to pay any mind; "Let me get you some tea, dearest, you

look awfully pale."

"I-I…" Loona choked on her own words as Harriette sluggishly got up from her lounge chair, before then hobbling herself over to the iron stove behind them. Atop of this stove was a simmering stainless steel kettle, the sound of water bubbling away softly inside hinting that it had been boiled before Loona had arrived. The disguised hellhound sat dormant within her seat as she dared not move, that nervousness and adrenaline continuing to build up within her, threatening to boil over. All that Loona wanted by this point was to get this over and done with, yet she still hadn't found the opportunity to ask her most pressing question, which in truth was the only thing that mattered:

"Where is this ritual being done?"

Without warning, the faintest strange scent found its way towards Loona's nose, snapping her out of her stiffness. It was a peculiar, extraordinary odor which was barely noticeable, and one which could only be picked up by the hellhound's remarkable sense of smell. A now fully alert Loona inconspicuously sniffed the air in a bid to catch the scent once more, almost instantly catching it after her second try. There it was again — that strange, almost ammonia-scented smell…

Suddenly, Loona's eyes widened with an awful realization; it was the smell of poison. That old bitch was trying to poison her.

Loona's initial feelings of anxiety and apprehension turned into a simmering anger, though one which she kept hidden — for the moment. The sound of fine china clattering upon the surface of a steel tray accompanied the shuffling of Harriette's weak footsteps, the old woman sliding the tray onto the varnished table between the lounge chairs before returning to her seat. Once she sat down, Harriette reached over to one of the cups of tea and carefully grabbed it by the handle, before relaxing back into her seat.

"Now, where was I?" Harriette slimily asks herself, giving Loona an unnerving glance as she did so; "…Oh yes, that was it. … You know, young lady, I know for a fact that you had a look at my wedding photograph in the entrance hallway. I could feel your little red irises eyeing it up with interest. Would you like to know why my husband's face is crossed out? … It's because he was going to do wrong against me, no less than thirty years ago to the date. My husband, 'Neil', was going to report me to the police, for he began to suspect that something was up with me, especially with regards to the 'disagreeable men' I was meeting with. He began to suspect that I was doing some… very immoral activities; ones that defy the word and will of God and man simultaneously. I knew he was going to squeal, so… he had an accident. I buried him behind this house in an unmarked grave. It's so well hidden in fact, that I no longer remember where exactly his grave is."

Before she could conclude this stint of ranting, Harriette noticed the baffled and unnerved look in Loona's eyes. This prompts her to continue; "Now you may be wondering why exactly I am telling you all this, hm? I am telling you all of this because frankly I do not care anymore, and no longer do I know fear. I am but a mere feeble old woman who is growing feebler by the day, and it's only a matter of time until I am no longer of this world. Soon with my death, my sins will be forgotten… Perhaps unpunished… Besides, there's just one last sacrifice we have to partake in until—"

"You want to know something, Harriette?" Loona suddenly interrupted with sternness to her voice, her patience with the old woman finally spent; "I don't think your sins are going to be left unpunished, actually."

Harriette seemed outwardly confused, squinting her eyes towards her visitor; "…I-I beg your pardon?"

"Don't give me that shit, old woman, you heard me loud and clear," Loona rebukes with firmness, her eyes widening to reveal more of her remarkable red irises; "Your sins are being paid today. And me? I'm going to be the one that sees it through."

"Vigilante justice…" Harriette slyly remarks with a crooked smirk growing on her horrid, wrinkly face, so far not taking Loona's threat seriously.

That smirk… that filthy, utterly evil smirk… It was enough to make Loona's methodical composure **SNAP.**

Suddenly Loona shoots right up from her seat, before turning around and flipping the piece of furniture over with all of her strength! This sends the lounge chair crashing into the floor with a thunderous "BANG!", the display of sudden aggression causing Harriette to yelp with fright! Loona stares coldly at Harriette with an unsettling look of hatred in her eyes, the rest of her face tense and rigid and void of any emotion.

The "journalist" asks her next question, her voice unnervingly calm; "Tell me, Harriette, seeming that you love telling your dirty secrets… where's the ritual happening?"

There was no reply, since Harriette was left completely stunned by Loona's sudden outburst of physical rage — the old woman's eyes were full of fear, with her clasped and grotesquely skeletal hands held close towards her chest.

A wife and provocative grin spread across Loona's face; "What's the matter, Harriette? Lost your appetite to talk, have you? Come on, what happened to the 'tell-all' Harriette from a few seconds ago?? … I'll ask again; where's this ritual happening, huh?"

…Harriette stayed silent and wide-eyed, though her jaw opened and closed aimlessly as though she was choking on her words. Now wasn't the time to choke on words however, as Loona's patience had well and truly worn thin. Loona lurches forward and firmly grabs hold of Harriette's crease-ridden face, causing her to yelp in discomfort and fright! The disguised hellhound's eyes were as wide as they could go, with her face full of quickly building malice and ferocity!

"I said where is it?!" Loona repeats herself with a voice which shakes the walls, looking down at the old hag pinned in the chair by her grasp!

In spite of Loona's dangerously growing aggression, Harriette remained defiant in the face of almost certain death! The psychotic old woman bared her crooked, yellow, near rotting teeth and snarled back, practically choking out her adamant response; "Go to hell, you—ack!!—L-LITTLE S-SLUT!"

Loona growls and snarls right back ten-fold, baring her teeth with such enthusiasm that her gums were visible; "Where do you think I come from, you rotten old BITCH?!"

Just as Loona finishes speaking with terrifying growling vigor to her voice, she becomes shrouded in a sudden glow of bright-blue light, completely covering her body and blinding the old crone firmly in her unforgiving grasp! This blinding blue glow of light vanishes as quickly as it appeared, permitting Harriette to open her eyes and stare with pure, unadulterated terror at the canine beast standing before her! There was Loona in her true hellhound form — the whites of her eyes given way for a sea of horrifying scarlet-red, and her face having turned into that of a beastly white-and-gray wolf with a long muzzle full of sharp, razor-like teeth which were clenched and bared menacingly!

If Harriette's earlier demeanor of being uncaring, fearless, and indifferent about the world was a mere facade, it had all well and truly collapsed like a rotting brick wall upon setting her eyes on Loona's true form! The elderly woman's slack jaw widened into a quivering mess having been well and truly petrified of this life-or-death situation. Finally she manages to squark out; "W-What are you?! W-What do you want from me?!"

“Oh for the love of— THE RITUAL SITE! WHERE’S THE GODDAMN RITUAL SITE?!” Loona barks and roars, with her wide, piercing eyes glowing with feral rage and a tone of voice to match!

Luckily for Loona, it seemed as though this was enough to make Harriette finally squeal, albeit with a strained, gravelly voice which practically begged for mercy — a kind of mercy which she never gave her husband, “A-ACK! …I-It’s north-west from here—! U—ACK!—A-At an old abandoned.. m-mining camp, hidden in… t-the valley!!”

The defenseless old woman groaned and yelped in agony as Loona shook her violently in the lounge chair, threatening to lift her up by her neck; “Where?! I want EXACT locations! Landmarks! ANYTHING!!”

Though the adrenaline and overwhelming fear was near paralyzing for Harriette to bear healthily, she manages to gasp out the details which Loona had emphatically demanded from her; “I-It’s in a clearing in the middle of the bush! There’s—NGH!—There’s a timber bridge over a river which gives access to it! … T-The dirt road leading to it is quarter-a-mile north-west of Kilgowie! NGAH!! There’s… a big two-storey brick building near the river, the powerhouse! That’s where Malloy will—ACK!!—BE!! PLEASE, I BEG OF YOU!! LET GO OF MY NECK, I CAN’T BREATHE!!!”

Long streaks of petrified tears were running down Harriette’s cheeks like droplets of rain running down a window, staining her skin with a silky, damp texture. It was painfully obvious to Loona that this wretched old woman wasn’t crying because she felt remorse; she was crying because she had finally been caught, and all of the bountiful pain and suffering she had caused to so many people was about to all be paid off like a lethal debt. A malicious and vengeful part of Loona begged for her to finish off an already slowly dying Harriette, in revenge for the literal hell this old bitch and her connections had put her through! A toothy grin of morbid intent grew wide across Loona’s maw as she prepared herself to deal the killing blow, yet… yet before she could, something told her to stop. It was another “voice”, much like the one “heard” in the confines of the interrogation room — it told her firmly and emphatically to ‘stop’. This second “voice” in question felt much more powerful than the last, as if it held a power over Loona which she herself couldn’t fathom. One word appeared within her mind regarding this “voice” which once it was stuck in her head refused to budge; this “voice” felt ‘righteous’ and ‘merciful’, as though it was… Heavenly in origin.

In an instant, Loona’s merciless grin vanished and her jaw went slack in a mixture of confusion and awe, all the while an almost otherworldly chill ran up her spine. Her eyes meet back up with the beyond horrified decrepit old woman still in her grasp, proceeding to drop her right back into the confines of her lounge chair. With a low and guttural growl, Loona gets right back up into Harriette’s face and issues her final word; “You listen to me, you horrible old bitch, and you listen good! This whole little game you’ve got going with Malloy? I’m going to stop it. I’m going to destroy everything which you two horrible fucks have worked on for all of these years. And there’s

nothing — NOTHING — you can do to stop me. And if you try? … I'll kill you. Mark my fucking words."

With one last threatening glare, Loona turns back around and heads for the entrance hallway, making her way back towards the—

BANG!!!

"ARGH!!"

The sound of a sudden gunshot deafens Loona as a bullet whizzes straight past her and into the wall just in front of her! Loona's survival instinct kicks in instantaneously like a switch as she spins around and lurches straight back towards the old woman! Harriette now held a pistol in her right skeletal hand, and one which was aimed directly at Loona's head! Before Harriette could have the opportunity to pull the trigger once more, Loona tackles the horrible old woman out of her chair and into the hardwood timber floor with a loud "CRACK!" The hellhound's assailant screams in horrible, gut-wrenching agony while trying to resist the wolf-beast pinning her down to the ground, trying to pry her crooked fingers into her eyes! Loona responds in kind by swiping her claws right across Harriette's face, causing her to scream even louder as her face spills open with blood from her newly-acquired gashes! In all of the old woman's thrashing and futile attempts to resist, the mug which she had used to try and poison Loona tipped over and crashed into the ground, splashing straight onto Harriette's right arm with a douse of piping-hot water, causing her even more unbearable pain!

THUD!!—THUD!!—THWACK!!—THWACK!!

While letting out bursts of ferocious snarls and growls, Loona begins smashing Harriette's head a few times into the floor in a bid to end this once and for all! Through all of the blood flowing out of her gashes, Harriette bellows her final words with a provocative, evil, snarling grin; "VICTOR WILL COME FOR YOUR PUTRID FUCKING NECK, YOU ROTTEN BEAST!! HE'LL COME FOR YOU AS WELL AS YOUR FRIEND!! WE WHIRL THE WORLD, YOU STUPID, NAIVE WHORE!! THE WORLD… T-THe world we… wh…whi…"

…

Loona let out deep and guttural breaths in exhaustion as she glared hatefully down at the bloody, disfigured, and lifeless body of Harriette Edgecliffe. There was something so oddly sickening about

looking at the wretched woman's horribly bloodied cadaver; not because of its nature of being a corpse or the way that she had died, but because of how much evil and iniquitous feelings and thoughts seemed to radiate off it, like the scorching heat of a fire. Loona gasps and grunts from the leftover remnants of the sudden adrenaline rush as she finally caught her breath, at last having the energy to break her gaze away from the deceased, horrid old hag.

KNOCK!!—KNOCK!!—KNOCK!!

Momentarily startling Loona was the sound of someone knocking on the front door, the newcomer making himself known; "Loona?! Loona, you alright in there?!"

To the hellhound's greatest relief, it was Jim. She replies exhaustively; "Yeah, I… Argh! Y-Yeah, I-I'm okay!"

Jim pushes the door wide open and marches towards Loona who was now standing in the hallway just outside the diminutive living room, both rifles slung over each shoulder; "The hell did those gunshots come from??"

Loona let out a prolonged sigh before gesturing into the depths of the living room. Jim took this as an invitation to go and investigate for himself, which he does so by scooting past the hellhound and peeking in, where he is met by the brutal, bloody aftermath of the carnage which had concluded mere seconds ago. Loona watches as Jim's eyes widen with shock from what he was seeing, completely frozen where he stood and wiping his hand down his face. He utters a few simple words; "Christ… So she tried to shoot ya, did she?"

"She almost got me, too," Loona states bluntly, pressing her back against the wall to give herself more time to calm her nerves.

The young man let out a low grunt as though he was disgusted and unnerved by the sight before him. He took off his flat cap off his head and wiped the sweat from his brow, leaning his back up against the wall directly opposite from Loona. There was a long, near deafening silence before Jim finally spoke; "So, uh… did anything productive come from this?"

"Well I know where this ritual's being held now, so… yeah, I guess so," Loona flatly informs, her eyes unfocused and full of thought, her anxious mind focusing on the journey still ahead of them.

“Alright, that’s good… at least…” That’s all Jim had to say until the deafening silence once more made itself known to both hellhound and human, filling the vacancy where sound once stood. Loona’s felt physically and mentally exhausted from a full day of running, fighting, and thinking on overtime. Though she knew full well that it was necessary to struggle on, Loona was quickly growing weary of what she had been through over the past week. Suddenly, the hellhound’s mind traced back to yet another foreign memory; that of a poem. She could tell it was a poem by the way it sounded and felt, especially how it seemed to fit eerily with her own situation:

“…Why do I feel so pained and Troubled?

What do I harbor; hope, regrets?…”

This melancholically beautiful string of words caused a weary, dry smile to form on Loona’s muzzle, the hellhound finding it oddly amusing with how she could relate to each word, and each solemn syllable. Who knows, maybe she could take up poetry? Seeming that it touched a part of her heart and soul which she never knew was there.

With nothing much left to say in an otherwise fucked-up situation, Loona pats Jim on his shoulder before quietly saying; “Come on, let’s get outta here.”

“What about the body?” Jim asks, gesturing towards the room where the pandemonium manifest lay mutilated on the floor.

Now this was a very good point; what about the body? What were they to do with this wretched old woman’s corpse? They couldn’t just leave it here, now could they? What if somebody found it? It had to go. … In fact, no… it all had to go. This body, this cottage; everything had to be gone. It wasn’t right to just leave this miniature hive of pure evil standing, all the while the body of a deranged psychopath lay bloodied and stiff on the timber flooring. If they were going to wipe Malloy’s evils from the face of the Earth, they would need to go “scorched earth”… literally.

Loona looks back towards Jim after gazing back towards the gruesome scene; “Wait outside. I’m gonna burn this place down.”

Jim was in no mood to argue, immediately abiding by Loona’s direction as he tramped back outside. Now that the hellhound was alone, she let out a huff and got to work. The overpowering scent of blood hit Loona’s nose as she reenters the small and compact living room, looking for something which she could use as a firestarter. It wasn’t long until she found her answer; the long, draping, silky curtains which lined the window, and conveniently enough, a small clear bottle of

kerosene which sat upright on the windowsill. Without wasting any time at all, Loona rips the curtains off the wall and drapes his haphazardly over the corpse, before then tearing open the kerosene bottle and pouring it all over the sprawled-out cloth.

Now came the risky part — Loona pulled out her lighter from her maroon jacket's right pocket, eyeing the shrouded body as she ignited a flame. Once the flame was ignited, she held it lightly against the cloth which quickly began to be covered in flame, though slow enough to give Loona time to retreat to the hallway! Soon the flames were as high as the ceiling, and only growing ever higher, signaling the beginning of the end to Malloy's hopes of making his next sacrifice. Before the fire could spread any more, Loona flees the cottage and links back up with Jim, the pair of them quickly leaving the house far behind their trail as they head back south. The afternoon sun made its way westwards, effectively marking the "end" of Loona and Jim's exceptionally full day. They would have time to rest and recuperate until they faced the burdens of what the next sunrise would bring.

Tomorrow was another day.

Thirty Hours Until The Ritual…

Written in Cyrillic

An overcast night sky, void of countless stars.

A pitch-black forest, void of any light.

A lonesome camp fire, crackling softly through the dark.

A tired young bushman, full of hesitant and wavering hope.

A hellhound, standing tired, yet defiant against the gustful and foul winds of the corrupt.

Two small mess tins full of canned pea soup simmer on a cooking grate above the lightly crackling fire, the pair of campers sitting in front of their respective tents as they gazed pensively into the mesmerizing glow. The very last orange hues of sunlight retreated in favor of darkness as the sun completely vanished below the westerly horizon, leaving nothing but the radiant fire to wash the campsite in its warm-orange haze. Loona's eyes stare aimlessly into the slowly dancing flames, watching the loose twigs and branches gradually shrivel up as the fire consumes it, like a vulture to fresh meat. There was something so intrinsically beautiful about the way the flames gracefully waltzed underneath the cooking grate, as if it just belonged with the rest of the pitch-black scene surrounding Loona; at least that was how she saw it, personally.

With a look of solemn and concerned understanding, Loona turns her eyes to glance over at Jim, who too was glaring aimlessly into the miniature inferno display with a look of pensiveness in his eyes — perhaps even more so than Loona. It seemed as though the sudden death and subsequent disappearance of his brother's body had shook his core to a degree he had not known before. The hellhound couldn't even begin to imagine the hurt that he must've been feeling, knowing that his own flesh and blood had ended up betraying him in such a way, almost like a character in a classical 'Old English' Tragedy.

Out of pure courtesy, Loona asks quietly, just loud enough to be heard over the crackling fire; "You okay?"

After a short yet prominent moment of thoughtful stagnation, Jim shrugs; “I suppose,” he replies solemnly; “I’m still alive, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, there’s that,” Loona agrees; “But I mean… you know… how are you going mentally?”

“...It hasn’t been easy, has it? You know that,” Jim quietly replies, finally averting his eyes away from the simmering campfire and back towards Loona; “I got my very own soul on the line, my brother’s died and his body’s vanished into the never-never, and now we’ve got the coppers trying to look for you. … Yup. It’s a right old mess we’re in, isn’t it?”

“Okay first off, if I didn’t escape, you would most likely be dead,” Loona mildly objects for just a moment; “But anyway, yeah… I know how you feel.”

“Yeah, well…” Jim mumbles, his jaw hanging slack for a moment as if wanting to say more before finally closing it, the thought having since left his mind.

Silence once more took hold of the two campers as they sat idle in the dirt, the buzzing sound of numerous crickets and other assorted insects hidden in the darkness chirping all around them. The fire crackles soothingly and in uneven intervals as Loona went to poke the fire with a long stick she had broken off from a branch, coaxing the fire to stay alive and plentiful with its wholesome, radiant heat. A display of intelligence seemed to come from the fire as it swirled its tendril-like flames around the stick Loona was using as a makeshift prodding tool, reacting as though it was a diminutive marsupial thoroughly investigating an invasive object.

While Loona watches the fire with an almost indifferent sense of mild intrigue, another pressing issue came forth to the very front of her mind — one which mildly unsettled her with a peculiar sense of curious wonder. She thought back to the events of just hours ago; back to her wild and sporadic final confrontation with Harriette Edgecliffe, when Loona had her hand gripped tightly around the old hag’s throat, ready to give her exactly what she deserved. Just before Loona could strangle the gasping woman to death, there came a sudden “voice”, wholly disembodied in its nature. In any other instance, she would’ve just done the deed regardless of whatever anyone told her and be done with it! Just like that without a shred of guilt! Afterall she did deserve it! But that instance wasn’t like ‘any other’ she had ever experienced before. It was as if something was trying to get through to Loona, one which resembled a “voice” which had nor tone or vocals. In fact, it was less like a voice and more like that of a feeling, or a conscience-like energy which greatly influenced her actions. After thinking further about what this ‘energy’ felt like, Loona realized that it felt strangely… ***divine***.

The hellhound was quick to deny this; Bullshit! As if anything from HEAVEN of all places would want to actively get involved in anything like this! … But wait, what about that messenger, 'Gunther'? He was sent from Heaven to come visit her through her dreams, wasn't he? A-And his disembodied voice warning her that she would be arrested… What if… What if something from Heaven WAS trying to help her? But then again, that was bullshit! As if they would! …R-Right?

This prompts Loona to turn and look at Jim once more, this time with another question; "Hey, Jim. Can I ask you something?"

"Hm?" Jim merely responds, steering his eyes back towards Loona in a sign that he was 'all ears'.

At first Loona was hesitant to ask what was lingering in the forefront of her mind, her mouth hanging awkwardly agape before finally asking; "Do you think something's watching out for us?"

The young man couldn't help but raise a curious eyebrow; "What do you mean?"

Loona squints her eyes for a moment in thought, thinking carefully on how to phrase the question; "As in, like… I mean, come on. You saw the carnage back at that house, right? I barely escaped with my life! That shot she fired barely missed my head, it would've killed me if I stood, like, a few inches more to the right! It probably sounds completely ridiculous, but… what if something from, you know… "u-up above" is helping us?"

"What, like a guardian?" Jim suggests, looking towards Loona with a look as though he was on the same page as the hellhound sitting right adjacent.

"Exactly," Loona confirms with a weak, half-hearted gesturing point of her finger; "It kinda makes sense, too. We've been 'shit-outta-luck' throughout this entire thing so far, yet we keep pulling through somehow. It's like something's… helping us pull through."

"Now there's a thought…" Jim ponderously mutters to himself, looking momentarily up into the pitch-blackness of the overcast and starless night sky. With a light sniff, he lowers his head back down and turns towards Loona once more; "You know what, I wouldn't be surprised if that's what's happening here. This whole bullshit situation has been nothing but confusing."

“Pffft! You’re telling me,” Loona remarks with a dry smirk and chuckle to match. That’s when she notices a certain pensive look on the young man’s face illuminated warmly by the campfire. The look in question was one which one would hold on their face if they were hiding a sensitive secret. This prompts the hellhound to inquire almost immediately with a knowing look in her eye; “Go on, spit it out.”

Initially Jim acted clueless; “Spit what out?”

Loona couldn’t help but roll her eyes; “Quit playing dumb, you know exactly what I’m talking about. You got a secret. What is it?”

Jim breaks out a dry and oddly nervous smile; “Where the hell did you get that idea from?”

“From the look on your face,” Loona replies, not once relenting from her prodding for answers; “Come on, you can’t hide it from me forever. What’s your secret?”

Just as the now fully attentive hellhound entertains her curiosity for a second time, she couldn’t help but notice the stubborn hesitancy which plagued the human’s eyes like a growth of moss to damp stone. It seemed as though whatever he was hiding was something which he held a certain level of ‘guilt’ over, which concerned Loona to a minor but sluggishly growing degree.

Eventually after a period of silence with nothing but the sound of crickets chirping to accompany them, Jim finally reveals the full extent and contents of his secret; “...I’ve been praying.”

Loona blinks nonchalantly a couple of times, taking a second to process what had been revealed; “Praying?”

Jim gives off a faint nod quietly, giving clarity to his claim; “Yup. … It’s what’s been keeping me sane, I suppose.”

Just as he finishes speaking, the young man becomes visibly uncomfortable where he sat as though what he had revealed was the most devastating thing imaginable to admit. It was as though he was preparing himself for the hellhound beside him to feel wholly and utterly betrayed, as though all of the month-and-a-half’s worth of friendship and mutual understanding built from the ground-up was all for nothing.

This assumption couldn't be further from the reality. Loona grew confused as she shrugged with indifference, then asking; "I-Is that it?"

"...W-What do ya mean?" Jim asks, expressing mild genuine surprise to Loona's honest and outwardly nonchalant reaction.

Loona only shrugs even more, obviously still confused and blase about the 'secret'; "What do you mean what do I mean? Is that all the secret is; that you've been praying??"

"And that doesn't bother you at all?" The young man questions with a hint of surprised disbelief about him.

"Jim. Come on, seriously," Loona smirks with a suppressed half-chuckle; "We're hunting down horrors beyond our comprehension. You praying is the very least of my worries."

Jim let off a shrug of his own, a faint smirk spreading across his face; "That's nice to know."

Loona couldn't help but prod Jim further; "What, did you expect me to start hating you or something??"

"I was actually hoping you wouldn't," Jim was quick to clarify, his crooked and "guilty" grin only growing wider with an uneven laugh.

Loona couldn't help but snicker at Jim's paranoia, leaning over to playfully punch him gently in the arm; "You're a dork, you know that? … So what've you been praying about?"

"Ah, well, you know," Jim began to reveal as he wiped the sleep from his eyes; "Just askin' to… keep the both of us safe through all this, and that we don't lose our heads. You know, the basics."

With a loud and broad grin, Loona raised a curious and amused brow; "Wait, so you… prayed for me? Did I hear that right??"

This was the point which sent Jim into a sporadic burst of brief stuttering; “I-I, uh… Ah fuck— Look, I know it sounds bad and it probably is, with you being, well… f-from Hell and all, and I… Listen, is it bad that I did?? Like it wasn’t direct or anything! It was a spur of a moment thing—”

“HAHAHA!! Woah-woah-woah, okay! I get it, I get it!” Loona at last interrupts with a sudden fit of laughter and the biggest toothy grin to compliment it; “Calm down, alright?? Jeez! I’m not gonna kill you over it! Honestly though? That’s kinda nice. So… thanks, I guess. I doubt anything will come of it though, because, well… you know what I mean.”

Jim let off a shrug; “Who knows, maybe it will.”

“Here’s hoping,” Loona dryly remarks as she gazes back into the waltzing tendril-like flames of the campfire. After a whole prolonged minute of silently staring into the miniature inferno display, she looks back upwards into the never-ending darkness of that starless and overcast night sky.

Loona began to think once more, going over in her head what the plan would be for the following day with the newly gained information she had. Before her painful and perhaps well deserved death, Harriette Edgecliffe had mentioned something about an old mining site “hidden in the valley,” and that there was an old dirt road less than a mile north-west of a town called ‘Kilgowie’ which would lead Loona right to it. The most important detail which stuck in her mind was the large brick building which was mentioned — the ‘Powerhouse’. If indeed Harriette wasn’t lying, that is where Loona would confront Malloy if she got there in time, and that is where her and Jim’s respective fates would ultimately be decided. One thing that did pain Loona was the sheer distance they would have to walk, considering also the gear they would need to haul on their backs in tow; a burden which would no doubt weigh the pair down for the entire hike.

To add to the problem of logistics, the list of viable solutions was next to none. Of course, a solution which immediately sprung to Loona’s mind was to “borrow” a car which they could use. But then again, to “borrow” said car would mean risking being caught by a police force which was already looking for her; something which Loona had absolutely no appetite to risk. The other option was to return to Jim’s house and use his Ute to travel northwards, which would again only risk them being caught in an already tense and high-stakes situation. Then there was the problem of discreetly traveling across frequently used public roads without being spotted, the chances of such a plan succeeding being literally next to none. Indeed, Loona was stumped, but hopefully not for too long. Hopefully by some confounded and out-of-the-blue miracle sometime in the very near future, a viable and effective solution would be found. From where, when, and from who was beyond her wildest guesses.

One thing was for certain, there was one day left and time was running out.

With nothing else to say, Loona sat with Jim in complete and utter silence, wasting the few hours of restful peace they had left until the next day — the ‘day’ to end all ‘days’. The remainder of the night slowly ticked on, periodic small-talk sprouting up from the depths of still silence like scattered weeds through cracks in the pavement as they ate their mess tins of simmering canned food. Loona decided to check her phone for the local time out of growing boredom, turning on her phone to reveal that the time was now approximately ‘7:20PM’. Just underneath the bold-fonted, white-lettered display of time was a message sent a few minutes before from none other than ‘Esme’.

The message in question read simply; ***“Call ASAP. It’s important.”***

A terribly ominous sinking feeling manifested itself in the deepest pit of Loona’s stomach, the simple four-worded message causing her a sense of oppressive worry once more. She excuses herself from Jim as she stands back up, lightly dusting herself off before walking just beyond the boundaries of the camp, propping her back up against a tree before calling Esme’s number. Loona held the phone up to her ear as the ringtone buzzed in her ear, before abruptly stopping on the third round to be replaced by the familiar sound of the fellow female hellhound’s voice.

“Hello?” Esme’s voice buzzed into Loona’s ear through the speaker.

“Esme, it’s me,” Loona answers with a calm and solemn tone to her voice.

“Oh. Loona, hey,” Esme responds in earnest, replicating Loona’s tone; *“How are you?”*

Loona let off a shrug to herself as though she was speaking to Esme in person; “Hmph. I’m still alive, I guess. You?”

“Ditto,” the fellow female hellhound replies; *“Okay, uh… look, thanks for calling back. I-I need to talk to you about… a-about—”*

“Is it about Morger?” Loona sedately asks with light hesitancy, taking the burden of breaking the news off Esme’s shoulders.

Esme goes quiet for a few seconds before confirming; *"...Y-Yeah. It's about Morger. ... Y-You listening?"*

"Of course," Loona quietly confirms as a dreadful anticipation begins to arise, weighing down on her like a steadily building pile of sandstone.

Eventually all of that building ominous anticipation came to a head when Esme let out a heavy sigh, clearing her throat momentarily before speaking; *"...A-Alright, so… So I've been staying with Morger for the past day or so just to keep him company, uh… 'Tex has come to visit him too, he's here at the moment. We—uh… We had the doctor come in about fifteen minutes ago to give us a rundown on how they think he's going. ... It's not looking good, Loona, it's… it's bad."*

Loona begins to feel weak at the knees as she quietly stutters; "H-How bad?"

Esme stammers a little after a short few seconds of stagnation, practically forcing herself to speak through the clear sad inflections to her voice; *"Uh… Okay, so after they did some emergency surgery on him, they ran another full-body scan. They managed to stop the internal bleeding, but they found that the bones in his arms and legs were just… well it's unreal. It's like he's been put through a meat-grinder. He's got two broken ribs, and his lower right arm's been completely shattered in multiple parts, and his left foot and lower leg has been splintered into little bits. They… t-they might need to amputate."*

"Shit…" Loona mumbles to herself just under her breath, pursing her lips before asking; "Is he going to make it?"

What followed suit was the most awful bout of deafening silence Loona had ever experienced. Though no words were spoken, the stillness in the air accompanied by the faint white noise of the phone painted a picture of a thousand mournful words. After an "eternity-worth" of unadulterated silence, Esme let out a soft, shaky breath before finally saying; *"...They don't know yet, but there's talk of... t-there's also been talk of 'pulling the plug'."*

Loona was left completely speechless as she froze in place with shock. Out of all of the things which could eventuate with Morger's sudden hospitalization, she had never for once contemplated the idea of having to 'pull the plug' on him. Was his condition really that bad? The pure shock Loona had felt upon hearing the news caused a faint tinnitus to ring in her ears as though she was hit in the face by a sudden unseen force. Without knowing, the hellhound began to disassociate

with her surroundings as she stood there in shock, staring off into the distance while coming to terms with—

"Loona? Loona, you there?"

The sound of Esme's voice on the other end of the line snaps Loona out of her stunned trance, blinking in rapid succession a couple of times as she snaps back to reality. She stutters before replying back to Esme; "O-Oh, yeah… Yeah, I'm still here. What were you saying, sorry?"

A somber exhale reverberates through the speaker before Esme repeats what Loona had missed; *"So yeah, 'Tex and I will stay here for the next couple of days just to see how things turn out. We'll keep you updated."*

"Oh, okay. Thanks, Es'. I appreciate it," Loona quietly expresses her gratitude, silently hoping beyond hope to herself that the instruments of fate would weigh in Morger's favor.

"Of course," Esme obliges; *"Stay safe, okay?"*

This kind-hearted wish of good wellbeing hit Loona like a brick, one which made her uncertain about how this god-awful nightmarish situation would end. Would she really be okay in the end? Will she be able to 'stay safe'? Once more Loona gazes up at the stars with troubled eyes before finally replying with one final word before she hangs up the phone; "...I'll try."

With her mood dampened even further than before, Loona wandered her way back towards the still healthily burning campfire, sitting herself back down in front of her tent no more than a few feet away from her fellow camper. The pensive and troubled hellhound was about to find herself lost with her own thoughts until Jim piped up, albeit in a softly-tempered voice; "Everything okay?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Loona flatly yet somberly replies, her eyes fixated into the deep, dark abyss of the night, listening to the never-ending chorus of crickets and other assorted wildlife chirping faintly within the bush.

After a little while of sitting stagnant in the relative shrouding silence of nature, Loona turns her head to look beside her respective canvas tent. Resting directly beside it and laid out neatly on a roll of tarpaulin was that same-old rifle that Jack Foster had gifted to her. Loona gazes intently at it,

all the while thinking about the final day which was just hours away. The pensive, weary, yet steadfastly determined hellhound knew that from here on end, every decision down to the most minute detail would ultimately decide not only Jim's fate, but as well as her own. Soon Loona would find out whether or not everything she had done to 'return the favor' was in complete and utter devastating vain, and whether or not her interference with these eldritch horrors' plans would end up deciding Loona's fate for her. Only time would tell, and time was depleting.

But for now? Rest was needed, for tomorrow was another day.

Once more, a dark wind blows.

Oy, moroz, moroz…

Ne moroz' menya…

A piercing chill sweeps across Loona's body as an icy wind blows gustfully through her fur. This wasn't enough to wake the hellhound up who continued to lay on her side… in the snow? Suddenly Loona's eyes flicker open to observe her surroundings, only to find something which left her completely bewildered. No longer was she in the comfort of her tent with a blanket draped over her in the depths of the Australian bushland — instead, she was lying out in the complete open, in the middle of some field which covered in a thick layer of blinding and howling snow in who-knows-where.

This was enough to motivate Loona to pick herself up from the ground in shocked confusion, all the while feeling the icy howling winds hit her fur like a thousand swarming insects made of frost! She staggered onto her feet while dusting off patches of snow which had settled on her clothes, all the while peering around with wide confused eyes at her surroundings — or rather, lack thereof. A dense and blinding fog shrouded the land which Loona stood upon, coating the air with its unforgiving nature. To make matters worse, the gale force winds which relentlessly blew stung Loona's throat with the near sub-zero temperatures they carried!

Loona calls out into the blinding icy fog while hugging herself for warmth, raising her voice to compete against the deafening roar of the winds; "Hello?! … Hey, is anyone out here?! … HELLOOOO?!?"

There was no reply.

That's when it hit Loona; she must've been dreaming. Of course she was! How else could she explain ending up out in some apparently desolate tundra when she had fallen asleep in her tent? In fact, this was more likely than not a third instance of one of those lucid dreams that she had grown accustomed to throughout the entire ordeal! At any moment, she would spot that same-old 'messenger' or 'Sub-Guardian' as that old German man so called himself.

"Alright Gunther, I know you're out here somewhere!!" Loona yells out once more, her voice shrill and bellowing; "Come on, where are you?! Please hurry this up, I'm freezing to death out here!!"

No response.

Loona tries yelling even louder, the continuous howling winds drowning her voice out in an overwhelming wave of sound; "GUNTHER, PLEASE!! COME ON, STOP FUCKING WITH ME, I'M COLD!!"

Though beckon, beg, and try as she might… Loona receives no response.

Now the hellhound was going from being confused to increasingly frustrated. It was bad enough to have to stand out in this wild and rabid blizzard, but it was another thing entirely to be apparently ignored by that godforsaken 'Messenger' when she knew for a fact that he was somewhere out there! In fact, no, he probably wasn't even here! … So then why was she having this scarily vivid dream?

Then came an all too familiar sound far off in the distance behind the thick curtains of fog. It was a very distant sound muffled by the colossal winds which continued to sting Loona's skin, but one which she could just make out. The sound in question was periodic and infrequent, and contained multiple syllables as though it was a voice. In fact, it was a voice, and once which Loona recognized, causing her to feel a spine-chilling dread. It was the mournful sound of a man, bellowing with what sounded to be unimaginable grief. That wailing… that awful fucking wailing… Loona had heard it in the other lucid dreams she had, coming from someone just out of sight as though they were a ghost.

Perhaps out of a strange sense of sympathy for the voice, Loona calls out once more into the foggy abyss; "H-Hey!! Can you hear me?! W-Who are you?!"

…

Nothing. Oppressive, desolate nothing.

Just as Loona was about to call out once more, something made her freeze. The gale force winds had ever-so-slightly died down, allowing for the oppressive fog to faintly subside. That's when Loona began to notice something massive and imposing off to her left, standing prominent like a mountain. Upon suddenly noticing the gargantuan dark silhouette, Loona squints towards it, trying to figure out what it exactly was. It didn't take her long to realize that what she was looking at was a building, but not just any building — it was a Cathedral, one which was guarded by a stretching fenced stone wall with a large iron gate.

The colossal Cathedral towering over Loona like a giant monument felt utterly imposing to the lone hellhound, who stood in awe of the sheer size of it. She was quick to realize that this particular Cathedral wasn't like any other she had seen before; not that she had seen that many in the first place. There were a few distinguishable features to this massive structure which made it stand out from the rest; for example, atop the Cathedral were a series of large domed roofs, and perched above them was a cross each. Adding to the peculiarity to this building were the crosses themselves. They seemed to have two more horizontal lines above and below the main beam; one short one directly above and aligned with the main horizontal beam, and towards the base of the cross was one which was diagonal. Adding to the whole mesmerizing aesthetic of the structure standing before Loona was the intricate masonry which had gone into its construction, giving the entire Cathedral an almost otherworldly appearance. Although the draping icy fog continued to obscure the building like a massive curtain, the colors of the near pristinely white exterior walls seemed to radiate through the mist and snow as though it was producing its own independent source of light.

An intense shiver ran up Loona's spine the longer she gawked at it with widened eyes. Of course she was meant to hate such a building, yet she couldn't bring herself to. There was something so oddly… beautiful about it. About its nature. It seemed almost inviting.

HUFF!!

Loona jumps suddenly with fright to the sound of a horse grunting, letting out a "YELP!" as she spun around to her right! Sure enough, standing no more than a few measly feet away from her was a tall black horse. The tall and steadfastly standing animal seemed to dwarf Loona by almost an extra foot, with a head which had to be at least thrice the size of her own. Its hide was made up of slick pitch black hairs which seemed to shimmer with grace from the little light there was, complete with a long flowing mane which draped over the entire length of the horse's muscular neck. With each breath the great imposing animal took, a white puff of mist exited through its nostrils, almost as though it was breathing fire.

Ne moroz' menya, moyego konya…

But that was not all, for perched upon the steed's back… was a tall rider in a saddle. The rider looked to be a Cossack. The rider in question, like the horse, was staring blankly towards Loona with a coldly analytical gaze. Loona diverts her eyes away from the horse and up at the lone rider, analyzing his eccentric appearance with even more confused intrigue. The man in question was wearing a long black Chokha with red borders where the sleeves ended, the lining of the coat where each side met lined with a long white and red band, and sown along the breast sections of the long coat were Gazyrs which contained ammunition. Perched upon the rider's head was a Cossack's Papakha made of rich black fur, protecting the wearer's head from the unforgiving freezing conditions. Completing the look of this suddenly appearing man was what was slung over his right shoulder — a rifle, the stock of which was made of a rich, dark-brown oak. Then Loona noticed the man's face. His face was cold, unfeeling, yet intimidating. He seemed to be around his mid-to-late twenties, his brown eyebrows perched prominently above his dark blue eyes. Growing healthily right under his nose and partially obscuring his mouth was a thick mustache which curled upwards at each end.

Loona was just about to speak before the Cossack rider loudly interrupted her, yelling with a booming voice through the prevailing howling winds; "VY TAM!! TY LOONA?!"

Loona could barely understand a word the Cossack had just said, shaking her head with confusion; "WHAT?!"

The Cossack tries again, this time speaking English; "I SAID YOU THERE! ARE YOU LOONA?!"

"Y-Yeah!! Yeah, I am!!" Loona screams right back to be heard about the horrific bone-chilling winds.

The rider bellows just as loud back, this time making his intentions known; "I've been sent to get you! Someone needs to talk with you here!"

The hellhound squints, shaking her head with even more confusion; "Who?!"

“You’ll have to come and see!!” The Cossack rider bellows once more, bellowing with his guttural voice as he grabs the reins of his horse, gesturing for Loona to come follow him with the horse heading directly towards the Cathedral; “Davay poshli!!”

The Cossack’s horse trots at a sluggish walking pace towards the large iron gate which began to open by an unseen force. Loona felt hesitant yet inclined to follow the stern-looking man and his steed, following closely beside while hugging herself tightly for warmth. Both horse rider and hellhound trudged through the large iron gates and onto the grounds of the Cathedral, the scale of which was more apparent as Loona got closer to it. If anything, the scale terrified her in a strangely awe-inspiring way. Just as the Cossack rider leads Loona no more than ten feet away from the gargantuan Cathedral, he steers the horse to the left, heading towards the direction where a large timber stable stood adjacent to the house of worship.

As they got closer and closer towards the stable, Loona felt inclined to ask, yelling over the howling gusts; “So who are you?!”

“All will be answered soon! In due time!” The Cossack confidently replies, getting off his steed and beginning to lead him by the reins.

“In due time,” he says… Not like she had much time to spare…

With one hand grasped around the reins, the Cossack grabs hold of one of the stable’s double doors and swings it open, battling against the forceful snowy winds as he did so. A series of whining creaks emanated from the door’s hinges as it swung open, allowing for the Cossack to enter into the stable with his stallion in tow. Loona follows closely behind, feeling a relieving warmth in the stable itself as soon as she walks underneath the entrance doorway. The stable was gloomy, yet clean, with only a few oil lamps hanging from the walls lighting the interior with just enough light, illuminating a select few key parts of the large room. Numerous stable bays lined both sides of the building, with the left stable closest to the entrance seemingly being reserved for the Cossack’s horse.

As the rider leads his horse into the bay, he gestures towards Loona while giving a verbal direction; “Head down towards firepit at far end. I’ll come join you soon, just be patient for few seconds.”

Loona, however, was adamant in finding out more; “So who am I talking to here, you or…?”

“That will be answered soon,” the horseman said bluntly while in the middle of unsaddling his horse; “Please go sit down.”

Though Loona felt a compulsion to argue brought about by impatience, she decided against it, instead caving in to the Cossack’s request and heading towards the very end of the stable. Positioned at the very far back of the stable beside a shabby timber door was, indeed, a lit firepit which had been improvized from a few loose bricks with rotted timber being used as fuel. The fire crackled softly as it beckoned Loona to come forth and rest beside it, using the wooden crates provided as makeshift chairs to make herself warm in all of its infernal splendor. Loona decided to do good by the “offer”, making her way towards the delicately glowing fire which would protect her against the cataclysmic and bitter colds. As Loona drew closer to the shabby makeshift set up, she noticed more curious things which complimented the scene. Accompanying the two smaller crates on either side of the firepit being used as de-facto chairs was a larger, rectangular crate, pressed up against the wall with some objects resting on top. The objects in question were a tin cup for drinking, a hunting knife holstered neatly in a decorated leather sheath, and last but not least, a picture frame which contained a black-and-white photograph. The photograph contained a photo of three men all dressed in the same matching traditional uniform. Holstered on their belts were sheathed silver daggers and a shashka sword each held to their sides. Loona approached the old photograph to take a closer look, noticing that the seated man to the right looked to be the very same lonesome rider that had escorted her into this stable.

Before she could get too fixated on the photograph, Loona decided to sit down on the crate to her right. It softly creaks under the sudden pressure before settling, with the hellhound making herself as comfortable as possible on its blunt and uneven surface. Shortly after sitting down, Loona notices the lone Cossack approaching her, rubbing his hands together from the cold and approaching the fire to keep himself warm. After hastily clasping his hands together against the warm radiating heat of the fire, he looks towards Loona with that same uncompromising stone-

faced look. Following a few brief seconds of staring at the hellhound who was staring right back, the Cossack clears his throat before speaking; “You comfortable?”

“Barely,” Loona replies with brutal honesty; “I’ll ask again. Who are you?”

“It doesn’t matter who I am. The ‘message’ that will be delivered to you is,” the Cossack stated dryly, the words leaving his mouth with cold seriousness; “I am not here to deliver it to you, though. It is Father Mikhail who will.”

Loona blinks; “Say who now?”

“Father Mikhail,” the Cossack repeats while making his way towards the timber door. He gestures towards it; “He’s just in here waiting for you. I’ll get him to come out, just a moment.”

And with that said, the Cossack opens the door and allows himself through to the other room, before shutting the door firmly behind him. Loona’s attention was fixated on the unseen other room as she began to hear the lone horseman speak, apparently talking to the aforementioned ‘Father Mikhail’.

“Excuse me for bothering you, Father, but the lady is here to see you,” the Cossack notifies the apparent second presence.

“You mean the hellhound?” Another gravelly voice very similar to the Cossack’s own asks for clarification.

“Yes, the hellhound.”

“And what makes you think that she is trustworthy to speak with? Don’t you know what she is?”

“I’m aware, Father, but the Angels did send for you to speak with her. The German also wished for you to talk with her.”

“Of course the German did. … That Gunther, an old fool he is, much like myself. … Why must this burden be put onto me? … Alright, I’m ready. I shall come out. Do wait in here for me until I tell you to leave.”

“Of course, Father.”

Suddenly the door opens with ‘Father Mikhail’ at last emerging from the confines of the dark and dingy second room. Loona wasn’t sure what to expect when it came to this ‘Father Mikhail’s’ appearance, whether or not his outward appearance would match his gravelly and gruff voice. What she didn’t expect was to see the Cossack emerging from the room, this time wearing a long black Cassock and a Kalpaki on top of his head, replacing the fur hat which he had worn up until this point.

Loona’s mouth went slack as she stared with disbelief, her eyes confused yet unimpressed all at the same time; “...You’re kidding me, right? Is this some kind of joke?”

‘Father Mikhail’ shook his head; “No it isn’t, I assure you. I am Father Mikhail.”

“Okay, great. So why didn’t you tell me that in the first place?” Loona asks bluntly, mildly annoyed that she had been effectively played as a fool.

“Perhaps I’m just an old fool,” Father Mikhail promptly replies in a display of self-humility. He finally closes the door behind him and goes to take his seat, but not before slowly and deliberately continuing to eye the hellhound sitting before him.

Loona, perhaps understandably, didn’t like being eyed with such a level of intent as though she were an object to be studied, an objection which she makes known; “Can you not look at me like that?”

Father Mikhail grunts faintly before replying; “Gunther did say you would be stubborn and adamant.”

“He said that, did he?” Loona remarks with a hint of annoyance; “Well he’s damn right about that. That’s all he knows what to do anyway — just say things and call it a day.”

To Loona's mild confusion, Father Mikhail let out a smirk from behind his thick mustache; "You are quite right about that. That is partially the reason why I have been sent to see you. That, and a… few other crucial factors."

"Right, gotcha," Loona replies; "So wait, what about Gunther, where is he?"

"He's not here," Father Mikhail was quick to affirm, finally moving to take a seat on the crate directly across from Loona, all the while maintaining his firm gaze on her; "As you might have heard, the Angels made a decision to send for me to speak with you instead."

This sudden revelation wasn't lost on Loona, with her suspicion of heavenly intervention in her fight at last being confirmed as fact. With a look of surprise, Loona asks; "Wait, as in… w-when you mean 'Angels', you mean…"

"Angels as in from Heaven. Where else did you think I meant? Where do you think I've come from?" The Cossack asks rhetorically, talking as though the answer was blatantly obvious and needed no further clarification.

Loona stammers for a moment while shrugging her shoulders awkwardly; "I-I mean, I know what you meant! I-it's just a lot to take in."

"I understand," Father Mikhail humbly states; "You have the eyes of Heaven watching your every move and it feels uncomfortable. I understand that, I have felt exact same way many times when I was alive. I understand that it must feel even worse for you, considering that you are, indeed, a hellhound."

"Hmph. No kidding…" Loona shudders nervously in response, knowing that those exact same 'eyes' were most likely watching her now; "...So why did they send you to see me this time instead of that 'Gunther' guy again?"

"Because…" Father Mikhail goes on to explain before momentarily trailing off, grabbing the nearby tin cup and taking a sip of some unknown drink. After taking a sip and swallowing the hot concoction, he picks up where he left off; "...Because a large part of what I am about to tell you isn't actually Gunther's business. Instead, it is mine on a… well, on a very personal level."

This piqued Loona's interest, her ears twitching to the sound of this developing information. She beckons for more, albeit with the briefest flicker of hesitancy, intending to be cautious with her choice of words; "What… w-what do you mean by that?"

A subtle growth of seriousness appeared within Father Mikhail's eyes as he shifted posture in his makeshift seat. He sets the tin cup down at his side before abiding by Loona's eagerness to learn more; "I don't suppose you remember meeting a man like myself earlier today, do you? He's a staunch and tall man with a face as hard as stone, and to an extent a heart to match — but for good reason. On many things, he takes after me, especially with his eyes and general appearance. He's Russian, more specifically that of Cossack heritage very much like myself. … Would you believe me if I said to you that man is my Great-Grandson?"

Loona froze in utter disbelief, her eyes widening with realization; "T-That Vasily guy's your great-grandson??"

"That he is," Father Mikhail 'Antonov' reveals, looking down at the ground for just a second before raising his head back up towards Loona; "He takes after his father, and his father's father, and so on. He's steadfast in his conviction and his Faith, and nothing will shake him from such, in spite of everything."

The impact of this sudden revelation left Loona in a brief yet prominent few seconds of stunned silence, the hellhound blinking rapidly and shaking her head to snap herself out of her daze; "Wow, okay. And I take it that where we are now has some… relevance to all this?"

"You are very observant," Father Mikhail remarks calmly; "I don't suppose you know the significance of the grounds we stand on. This — or rather was — is the Saint Sophia Orthodox Cathedral which stood on the outskirts of Rostov in Russia. I was born in a village on the outskirts of these very grounds, and for many years it was my home. When the Civil War came, I enlisted myself into the Drozdovsky Volunteer Regiment. We were tasked in defending this very Cathedral when the Bolsheviks were advancing south, and I was one of the very first to stand up for the task. It took the Bolsheviks two weeks to overrun us, and when they did, they rounded most of us up, including myself because I was a monk here in life, and they executed us before then burning this Cathedral to the ground. Nothing remains of it in the present day, so what we are amidst is what it looked like prior to those devils demolishing it. Luckily my wife, who was three months pregnant with my son and daughter, managed to escape on a ship heading out from Sevastopol. … The rest is history, with the current effective "Patriarch" of the family being, to be sure, Vasily."

Truly Loona was at a complete loss for words, the sudden de-facto ‘history lesson’ leaving her tranced with a sense of awe and bewilderment all at the same time. Initially she thought of saying something in return, though she couldn’t find the right words, instead choosing to remain silent. Though it was near missable, Loona couldn’t help but notice the look of solemnity plaguing his eyes as though he was withholding something heavy which weighed on his very soul. Her concentration is shattered when somewhere in the distance outside, that same painful cry of a man screaming in astronomical pain echoes through the howling winds.

This prompted Loona to ask with a feeling of heightened uneasiness, gesturing her finger back outside towards the stable doors; “W-What the hell is that screaming, who is that?”

Father Mikhail sniffed briefly as he lifted his pensive and weary eyes back up towards Loona, that same look of solemnity tinting his eyes with a look of sorrow and regret. The hellhound stares right back with uneasiness in her own scarlet eyes, anticipating an answer… which didn’t come. Instead the holy man continued to stare silently at his visitor, his mouth flapping open and close for a second as though he was hesitant to reveal the truth he withheld.

Loona furrows her brow, her patient wearing thin. This time, however, instead of lashing out and outright demanding an answer, she practically begged; “I said what is that?? Please, Father Mikhail, I need—... I-I need an answer.”

The weary man let out a suppressed elongated sigh as he clasped his hands together. He looks back towards the stable’s double doors for a moment before looking back towards Loona, then at last finally revealing; “That young gentleman you are protecting, as I am sure you know, isn’t Victor Malloy’s first victim. … In fact, amongst that list of victims of his grave sins is my Great-Grandson.”

“...What??” Loona almost couldn’t believe it. In fact, no, she couldn’t! Or could she?! This sudden reveal hit the hellhound like a tonne of bricks, instantaneously making her disorientated with surprise.

Suddenly it hit her… Holy shit, so THAT’S why his voice sounded so familiar! Dammit, why didn’t she realize this much earlier?! She should’ve figured it out herself instead of being told by some Christian Monk in yet ANOTHER bizarrely lucid dream!! Fuck, how could she have been so clueless?!

With a sudden burst of adrenaline-fuelled excitement, Loona eagerly asks; “Wh– He is?! What do you mean he’s a victim, a-as in he’s also being hunted down by Malloy??”

To Loona's further confusion, Father Mikhail shook his head, once more taking a passing sip of his drink; "No, not like that. Instead it is the other way round. For the longest time, Vasily has been trying to no avail to bring Victor Malloy to justice for a very personal reason."

Another bellowing and bone-chilling wail echoes from outside, making Loona wince and fidget in discomfort. The most concerning thing was the fact that it sounded to be getting louder, if not closer…

"No seriously, what the fuck is that outside??" Loona asks anxiously, her eyes darting between the Monk and the stable doors which rattled with the terrible gales.

It seemed as though Father Mikhail ignored Loona's question, continuing with his explanation; "Vasily was no stranger to Victor. He had been keeping note of his criminal tendencies since the late nineties, having pulled him up for the links to a murder and numerous assault charges down in Sydney."

Another burst of god-awful wailing echoes from outside, causing Loona to grit her teeth. She knew the culprit of that horrifying sound — "Vasily" or otherwise — was getting closer.

"His expertise in forensics landed Victor Malloy two years in prison on charges of assault and attempted battery. Unfortunately when dealing with criminals, you tend to put yourself at risk of becoming a target of revenge. With most criminals, you are most likely the only target for said revenge. Though some choose to act differently. Some like to send staunch reminders — reminders which haunt men to their graves."

Even more wailing reverberates from outside, though this time it sounded as though it was no more than a few feet away from the entrance. Loona's eyes were wide with morbid curiosity and fear as she gawked at the wooden doors. A bizarre urge to go and investigate took over the hellhound's mind as she subconsciously got up from her seat, beginning to make her way slowly towards the door — it was as if her body had gone into autopilot.

Father Mikhail slowly followed Loona, staying back as he continued speaking in an eerily solemn tone; "For most criminals, they prefer to choose the former option and deal revenge at the root. Victor Malloy is not like "most criminals", for he delights in the idea of prolonging suffering for as long as possible."

A faint tinnitus rang out within Loona's ears as she inched closer towards the door. *Five feet… Four feet…*

"That is why, on the evening of one late winter afternoon, Malloy set his murderous sights on a girl, but not just any girl…"

Three feet… two feet…

"...One which he knew would decimate Vasily's heart and soul if any harm came to her…"

One foot…

Loona shakily peeks through a crack in between the doors, preparing herself to the best of her ability.

"...His daughter; Tatiana Antonov."

…

The scene which Loona saw through that crack in the door… It was almost too much. It was wrong, all so sickeningly wrong…

Standing a mere ten-or-so feet away from the stable was a younger-looking Vasily Antonov as clear as day. He was crouched in the snow on his knees with a look of pure devastation on his face, his cheeks stained with tears with his eyes wildly unfocused and gazing into nothingness. It took Loona no time at all to realize there was copious amounts of hot-red blood staining the front of his shirt, as if he had been mortally wounded — She was quick to realize that it wasn't his own, noticing the figure clutched desperately in Vasily's blood-soaked arms. It was a girl, perhaps no older than eighteen, lying limp and bloodied in her father's arms. Her face and former yellow shirt was coated in a thick layer of blood, making her face practically unrecognizable under the liquid scarlet veil. Most heartbreaking and stomach-churning of all was the large buckshot wound to her forehead — the obvious source of the copious amount of blood.

*“**HURK!!** ... **H–HOOOUUURRR—!!!**”*

Loona couldn’t stomach it any further as she began retching, crouching over before vomiting loudly! Bile spewed out of her mouth and into a sickly pile on the dirt floor, the hellhound gasping for breath after it was done as weakness overcame her. With profoundly horrified eyes, Loona glares back up towards Father Mikhail standing solemnly before her. She gasps out in a shaky voice; “W-What the.. What the fuck..?! … W-Why are you telling me all this?? … Don’t I have enough to deal with?!”

“Because you have a task you need to complete when you awaken,” Father Mikhail affirmed with a look of somber seriousness in his tired eyes; “When you awaken, you need to go and speak to Vasily. He is staying at the ‘Duke of Wellington Hotel’ in town, that is where you’ll find him. You must speak with him, offer him your assistance in finding Victor Malloy, for without him you will perish, along with Mister Steele.”

Loona huffs in bafflement, finding this direction absurd; “WH— Are you kidding?! If I go into town, I’m going to be arrested as soon as they find me! Vasily will have my fucking HEAD if I try to talk with him! NO! I won’t do it!”

“Then you’ve already lost!!” Mikhail’s voice boomed with a raised tone, the sound of which echoed across the rafters high above.

The words quickly sunk into Loona’s mind, provoking her to ask; “What do you mean??”

“That “blessed” bullet you have — You are foolish to assume that it can protect you,” Father Mikhail began to inform with a stern look in his eyes, staring hauntingly into Loona’s very soul; “It is not truly blessed, for it is blessed in vain! Yes it can harm, but it cannot protect you from the harm that those beings from the deepest pits of Hades have to offer! Vasily is a Holy man with actual faith — that will protect you all when you confront Victor Malloy’s shrine in that building. That is why you must speak with him.”

Loona’s eyes began to water with stress and anxiety as she clenched her teeth, trying to take this all in. She is interrupted when Father Mikhail speaks once more; “Please. Although you are of hellish origin, there is a glimmer of good within you which I haven’t seen before. … Do this, for it is the right thing.”

The hellhound let out a shaking exhale, doubt filling her mind; “...But what if he doesn’t listen?”

Father Mikhail, with a look of stern assurance in his eye, replies with one final word; “But he will.”

Eighteen Hours Until The Ritual…

Hellhound Amongst The Faithful

“…SNRK—!! Nnngh… Rhhh, fuuuuck…”

Loona wakes up within the safety of her canvas tent with a cold sweat, the horrifyingly lucid dream which she had to endure at last over to her honest relief. Though the borderline nightmare was finally over and done with, unluckily for Loona, she didn’t leave it without a side effect — she had awoken with a throbbing headache. This wasn’t just any ordinary headache either, but rather one which was akin to that of a hangover, rendering Loona disoriented and lethargic as if she had been binge drinking. Great, just great — this is “exactly” what she needed on perhaps one of the most crucial days of her life! This was yet another annoying obstacle for Loona to overcome on top of everything else.

“Mmmh… Goddammit, why me..?” Loona murmurs to herself in futile protest against her head’s temporary ailment.

With her throbbing head buried in her hands, Loona attempts to lift her head with minimal pain from her borderline migraine with little success, the hellhound letting out a wince in discomfort as she quickly gives up. She curses under her breath as she stares upwards at the tent’s ceiling, her back flat against the bed roll she lay upon. Loona attempts to remedy the hangover-esque headache by closing her eyes, which to her honest surprise seemed to provide minimal but sufficient relief. Each breath she took was slow and methodical, all in the purpose of remedying her still hammering migraine, her eyes gently closed as she dared not move. For the next solitary and still few minutes, Loona repeated this deliberate breathing exercise until she at last began to feel the thumping inside her head subside. With the pain now minimal enough to bear, the freshly awoken yet still lethargic hellhound flutters her eyes back open, finding herself staring up towards the ceiling of the tent once more.

Loona gives a slow and brief examination of her surroundings, checking the area for any signs of bile or vomit from the stomach-churning imagery of her dream, finding to her relief that no such disgusting residue existed. Upon remembering the horrific imagery she saw that night in her sleep, she began to feel nauseous once more, therefore prompting her to avoid the memory altogether. To divert her mind away from the lucid dream, Loona finally heaves herself up to sit in an upright position, slowly doing such as she looks outside through the slightly ajar tent flap, noticing that it was still dark out in the westerly horizon. Though sunlight was yet to wash over the landscape with its mesmerizing orange haze, Loona could tell that a light morning fog had settled itself amidst the trees like a smothering blanket.

A few sluggish minutes came and went with Loona sitting dormant inside her tent, giving herself some time to wake up and, as some say, “smell the ashes”. Before she could become bored, a

freshly awake Loona decided to grab her phone to give herself something to look at. The sudden flash of the phone screen turning on causes Loona to squint her eyes, peering at the time which reads in bold, white numbers: ***"4:59AM"***. The hellhound mindlessly sniffs as she wears a completely blank poker face, unlocking her phone before going onto Sinstagram to begin doom scrolling. In no time at all Loona's mind began to drift into comfortable numbness as she became tranced with the contents of her screen, watching as each stupidly mind-numbing post scrolled by without a care in the world. One post, however, managed to catch Loona's attention for more than a second, causing her to raise her eyebrow with mild interest.

The post was simple yet attention grabbing — it was the summarized title of a news article, one which read as follows: ***"BREAKING NEWS: Verosika Steps Up Security After Encounter With Rogue Intruder — Authorities Searching For Suspect".***

"Huh…" Loona dismissively comments to herself before swiftly moving onwards, pushing her thumb upwards against the screen to move onto the next post; something about different shading techniques in digital art. After no more than half a minute, even this half interesting post lost Loona's attention, the hellhound once more searching for something else to captivate her mind. Before she could find another mind numbing post to indulge in, Loona noticed that on the small display on top of her screen titled 'Friends list', Octavia appeared to be online. She had posted an untitled post which featured the taxidermy Loona had bought for her not too long ago, the small bird's eerily lifelike appearance on full display as it stood motionlessly on the artificial branch.

This post made Loona smile faintly, the hellhound deciding that now would be a good enough time to talk with the Owlet once more. She taps her thumb against Octavia's profile picture which brings up the option to shoot her a direct message. A briefly yawning Loona types a quick and straight-to-the-point message: ***"Hey :) You free to talk a lil?"***

To Loona's piqued yet faint surprise, Octavia took no time at all to respond. The little typing 'triple-dot' icon on the bottom left of the chat room indicated that the poster was typing a message, one which was sent no more than three seconds flat later: ***"Yeah ofc"***

Loona types a follow-up message: ***"Want to do it as a call or…?"***

… , …

"Might as well LOL"

Octavia's immediate message right back was a warm and welcome invitation, one which indicated enthusiasm to commit to Loona's suggestion. Suddenly an incoming call from the very same Owlet flashes up onto the hellhound's screen, the phone silently vibrating in her hand as she had put it on 'silent mode' throughout the night for a perfect night's sleep. Loona answers in no time at all, accepting the call before lazily holding it up to her ear. She drawls with a slurred and tired speech pattern; "Hey hey, 'Via.. H-How you doing, huh..?"

"I guess I'm alright," Octavia answers through the phone, her voice buzzing through the speaker; *"What's up with you? You sound awful."*

"No no, I'm fine," Loona tries her best to assure through her groggy voice; "I-I just woke up, like, two minutes ago now..? Heheh. I'm still tryna wake up."

"Heh. That's fair," Octavia replies with a brief suppressed snicker of her own; *"Wait, where are you right now? It sounds like you're outside."*

"I'm camping. Just up in the human world at the moment," Loona obliged by the Owlet's curiosity, at last waking herself up enough to speak coherently and without drawling. The sound which gave it away was the faint buzzing of a group of some unknown insects somewhere in the bush. Turns out that in addition to her ability to identify different stars and species of Human World animals, Octavia had a very profound and keen sense of hearing.

Upon hearing of Loona's whereabouts, Octavia got momentarily enthusiastic; *"Oh, cool! Wait... Why are you up there?"*

"Well, uh… you know… I'm up here for the uh—... you know, the 'thing' with Jim," Loona stammers faintly, hinting as close as possible to the point without outwardly saying it.

"Ohh, that..." Octavia solemnly acknowledges, her voice becoming slightly more serious; *"A-And how's that going?"*

"Well besides being arrested by the police up here, escaping them, then going to narrowly save Jim's life, before then visiting some old hag who nearly kills me, before finally being visited by some Christian Monk in my sleep… Things are going shit so far," Loona admits after giving a quick summary of all of the events which had happened over the previous day.

"Woah…" Octavia simply remarks; *"Okay, uh… That's definitely a… Hang on, what was that last part you said??"*

Loona blinks; "Which part, about the monk?"

"Y-Yeah, that one!" The Owler was quick to exclaim with surprise; *"You got visited by… a Monk? In your sleep??"*

"Tsh! You better believe it," The hellhound remarks with dry humor; "I almost couldn't believe it either. It was scarily lucid, too, but I don't think it's just some 'dream'. I've been having them fairly frequently."

"What was this one like? Did you see anything??" Octavia eagerly prods, her tone of voice indicating to Loona that she was genuinely interested.

Loona let out a dry snicker, grinning emotionlessly; "Oh shit, I saw something alright. It was weird; I was in a blizzard, then here comes the priest on a horse outta nowhere. He leads me onto the grounds of this massive church and into this big stable next to it. A-Anyway to cut a long story short, I need to go find the guy that arrested me and talk to him. Oh yeah! Also it turns out I've got the literal eyes of Heaven watching my every move, so that's fun."

There was a moment of stunned silence on Octavia's end of the line as she processed everything Loona had just revealed. The hellhound hears the Owlet stutter in astonishment before finally saying; *"W-Wow, uh… Now that's something. You sure it wasn't just a dream?"*

Loona shakes her head; "No, I don't think so. It seemed too real for it to be just that. So, yeah, guess I gotta find this dude and try and talk to him. Here's hoping I come out alive… Anyway, uh, how's your dad going?"

"He's about the same," Octavia informs sadly, referring to his state of physical health; *"We've had to bring in other specialist nurses from Sloth, just to monitor how he's going twenty-four-seven. They say he's got something like a really stubborn bird flu."*

Loona hummed in a short monotone pitch to express concern for Stolas' health; "Mmm. Well shit, that sucks. I hope he gets better soon. … O-Oh, uh, 'Via? I gotta tell you something about this…

“thing” I’m doing.”

“A-Alright?” Octavia briefly acknowledges with hesitancy about her voice. It was almost as though she was anticipating with concern for what Loona had to say; *“What’s, uh… w-what’s up?”*

Just before Loona could speak any further, she choked on her words the very moment she opened her mouth. She tries again to speak but to no avail, her agape mouth awkwardly flexing open and close like a fish out of water. What had stunned Loona enough to make her choke back her words before they had the chance to come out was a realization — a very sobering realization. Within the next twenty-four hours, she could very well be dead, whether at the hands of those Eldritch beings, Victor Malloy himself, or otherwise. ‘Mortality’ — a very simple yet powerful word, and one which weighed bear on Loona at that very moment like a millstone.

The hesitation which held Loona back from speaking finally alleviated, allowing her to resume talking to Octavia on the other end of the line; “Via, I, uh… Don’t freak out, but… but I think there’s an even chance that I might die soon.”

A faint huff could be heard from Octavia’s end, one which sounded baffled by Loona’s notion. Octavia pipes up in a profound tone of confusion; *“What?? Loona, what do you mean??”*

“Let’s be real. This… ‘thing’ I’m going up against is huge and ancient. The chances I have against it are very small,” Loona soberly asserts; “If you don’t hear from me in the next day or so, then I’m probably… well, dead.”

“No…” The Owlet protests; *“Nonono, Loona listen to me. You’re not going to die, you’re going to beat this. I-I know you will!”*

It broke Loona’s heart to hear Octavia getting worked up at the possibility of her dying, the hellhound wincing with regret of having even begun to say this in the first place. Regardless however, Loona continues — she had to; “Via, please listen to me. I need you to listen to what I have to say, okay? Are you listening?”

“Of course I am,” Octavia asserts soberly, her voice still full of growing and ample confusion and worry. To top it all off… She sounded scared.

In truth, Loona was just as scared, if not more so, than the young princess just a phone call away. Through all of the running about and micromanaging she had been busy with, the hellhound hadn't had any time to herself to have a proper think at what exactly was at stake here, what was at stake for herself and herself only — Her life. Loona's very own life was well and truly at stake. One wrong move, and she would be snatched away from everyone and everything she knew. From her home, from her friends, from the things which made her happy and granted her a sense of belonging. She would be taken away from the opportunity to maintain this and do so much more. Loona had hopes and dreams, ones which she wanted to become true oh so desperately, but may never come true due to her very probable untimely fate.

Loona's vision turns slightly misty as her eyes begin to water, albeit for just a moment before she wipes them away. With a shaky breath, the hellhound decided to make a wholeheartedly honest confession; "…I'm scared, Via. I-I'm terrified for my life. Something's gonna happen, and it's gonna make me fuck up and end up killing me. … I really do think this is the end."

"... I don't think it is," Octavia quietly states on the contrary.

An optimistic observation to be sure, and one which took Loona by a glimmer of surprise. In spite of the flicker of optimism given to her by Octavia, the hellhound's own pessimism stayed stubborn in her mind; "You don't?"

Octavia was staunch with her conviction; *"No. I really don't think it is. You've survived through so many other things already, who's to say you won't survive this, too? I know you will kick this thing in the ass, I believe you will!"*

"But what if I—"

"But nothing, Loona! You gotta stop doubting yourself, you know? That's how it gets to you. You want to know what WILL kill you? Thinking that you can't do it. Despair does kill, Loona, so don't let it kill you. You know what to do to fight against this thing, so just do it! Odds be damned!"

Octavia's little rousing speech left Loona completely dazed. She hadn't heard something so evocative and hopeful from the owl princess for the short few months or so she had known her. It was as though hearing a friend of hers become so doubtful and hopeless about herself ignited something within Octavia which had rarely been ignited before, if not ever!

Loona sighed shakily as her eyes twinkled from the faint droplets of tears which had formed, before softly replying to the embodiment of moral support on the other side; "…Thanks, Via. I-I think I kinda needed that."

"Damn right you did," Octavia affirms, letting out a shaky sigh of her own in a sign of her emotional state; *"Just don't give up on us, okay? Don't you dare do that."*

"Heh.. I won't, Via, don't worry," Loona laughs faintly, averting her eyes away from the screen to look outside, noticing that the sky had grown ever-so-slightly brighter. It seemed that the morning proper was about to begin, the first rays of sunlight beginning to arise in the eastward horizon. Loona rubs the bridge between her eyes as she admits; "Ugh, I-I'm sorry, Via. I'm just so tired of dealing with this. I want it to be over…"

"And it will, Loona," Octavia asserts again; *"But you need to keep going. Please stay safe, okay?"*

"…I will. I promise," Loona reassures in return; "Argh— Anyway, I gotta go. Need to fix myself for today."

"Of course," the Owlet replies before letting out an almost obnoxious yawn; *"Nngh… I have to head for bed, too. Goodnight— or, well, 'good morning' for you."*

The hellhound couldn't help but softly smile to herself; "Goodnight, Via," she responds in kind, at last hanging up the call with a slow tap of the red icon displayed on the luminous screen.

And hence, from the very moment the call ended, Loona was once again left alone to her thoughts in that cold, brisk morning; the sun rising in a deliberately slow pace to the east, the overarching rays of light yearning to grace the land below with its near wondrous light. With the sky now appearing as an extremely dark gray with a faint tinge of light, the sober hellhound could make out more of the plentiful forestry around her which was all completely caked in that whimsical thick morning fog. No longer did Loona feel that harrowing and oppressive headache which ailed her a short ten minutes ago to her relief, and no longer did she feel the mood to rest any longer. With this newfound motivation to move, she crawled right out of her tent to greet the day with a nervous yet defiant embrace, knowing full well that the day ahead of her would not return the favor of being so kind, if not punish her harshly and severely — if not brutishly — for having the courage to get up out of bed and confront it head-on.

Today was truly the day of days.

Loona slips on her just days-old maroon jacket, providing herself with a layer of protection against the freezing cold of that silent morning. There were still a few hours left to go before Loona planned to head right back into the town resting under the mountain's shadow, giving her ample time to wash her face, eat, and other essential preparations. Much like the last few objectives she had committed to, Loona planned to once more enact upon this next mission alone, intending herself to be as inconspicuous and methodical as possible. The plan was this: Loona would sneak into town at around Seven O'Clock sharp and head straight towards the fabled 'Duke of Wellington Hotel' where, according to 'Father Mikhail' from her dream, she would find Vasily Antonov lodged in one of the rooms — she had to do all of this, all the while trying to avoid being caught by the police who were more likely than not searching for her. From there, she would try to find the aforementioned Mister Antonov and try to reason with him, telling him that she knew about Victor Malloy and what he had done to him, and that she would need his help to end Malloy's "life" of countless sins and crimes once and for all.

Was it a stupid and risky plan? Absolutely. But Loona had no other choice — after all, she had to do the 'right thing'. Something beckoned her to do so, that 'something' being undoubtedly Heavenly and Divine in origin, as evident from the message delivered to her the night before. A thought graced Loona's mind which made her smirk; although it seemed completely ridiculous to imagine, what if in the slightest chance she had a Guardian Angel? She thought about how nice that would be, to have someone looking out for her who had ethereal power. Instead, at least to what was apparent to Loona, all that her theoretical Guardian Angel seemed to do was stand back and watch, like a nonchalant spectator indifferent to the results.

Soon Loona's mind wanders off the topic of Mortality and Guardian Angels and the like as she stares back towards Jim's tent. Both front flaps of the canvas tent were still pulled shut with Jim's lightly weathered boots resting in front of the entrance, signifying that the occupant of the tent was still asleep. This of course meant that for the time being, Loona was alone for the first few hours of daylight, allowing for an hour-or-so of extra time to herself. In what could be described as a half-compulsive action brought about by a borderline obsession with her phone, the hellhound checks her phone for the time once more: ***"5:11AM"***, it reads in its obnoxious bold white font.

"Too early", Loona thought calmly to herself, proceeding to then approach the snuffed out campfire to light it once again.

'The Duke of Wellington Hotel' is a two-storey Victorian Era hotel primarily built from brick that has stood firm on its foundation stone since the very day of Morrisvale's founding. Commissioned by William Dean Morris — Morrisvale's founder — in late-1874 and opened on the town's founding in June of 1875, 'The Duke of Wellington Hotel' was built largely to accommodate for cattle drovers traveling from Warwick on their way to Toowoomba, as well as the return trip in the

opposite direction. In spite of the little resources provided for the hotel's construction, the hotel features a lobby section at the main entrance, a ground level bar section which takes up one-quarter of the building, a second floor reserved entirely for accommodation, and an underground cellar with enough capacity to store six-month's worth of alcohol. Very little has changed through the 148 years the hotel has been in operation, with the majority of the structure maintained to its early pioneer state.

This was the building that Loona came face-to-face with as she stood on the other side of the road, all the while trying to be as nonchalant about her intentions as possible. To nullify the risk of being caught, Loona had opted to take the long way round into town, using the hastily-drawn map Jim had illustrated for her as her sole tool of navigation. Luckily for her, 'The Duke of Wellington Hotel' according to the map was located on the western outskirts of the town, allowing for Loona to completely avoid having to go through the main roads where she knew the authorities would be lurking most. The part of town which the hellhound — disguised in her human form — now found herself in was particularly barren, if not deserted, with barely another soul wandering the streets, except for a teenaged local who passed her on the footpath without even bothering to look in her direction.

With a keen and focused eye, Loona carefully examines the building while in a planning state of mind. Finding the hotel was one thing; trying to find Vasily Antonov without drawing outside attention to herself was another objective to perfect. Loona was quick on her heels as she briskly crossed the road, abruptly slowing down once she had reached the entrance to the decades-old structure stuck in its own little pocket of time. The pleasant velvety smell of a rose-scented air freshener hit the visitor's senses as she wandered slowly into the lobby, the floor covered with encaustic tiles which were plentiful with patterns of black, gray, and dull white. The walls were painted a pleasant dark-green, along with vintage dark oak wall panels lining the lower half of the wall. Within this spacious room was a front desk to the left and a velvety-maroon visitor's couch pressed up against the wall to the right, along with a large painting of a flock of horses galloping through a field hanging up directly above the luxurious piece of furniture. Directly in front and off to Loona's right were two entrance ways; the widest one, which was directly in front of the hotel's newest visitor, lead into what appeared to be the designated bar area, while the narrower passageway off to her right was occupied with a staircase which lead upwards to the second floor. Naturally and without any appetite to explore and hence stray of course, Loona opted to venture her way towards and up the staircase, completely ignoring the hotel's sole clerk expressing a simple greeting of 'good morning'.

With a careful and calm step, Loona slowly ascended up the stairs which were covered in soft maroon carpet with even more intricate antique patterns. It took the disguised hellhound no time at all to reach the second level of the hotel, discovering that the floor was layered with the same pleasant and pristinely maintained carpet as the stairs leading up to it. Much like the floor below, the upstairs level of this hotel of many decades and histories had a blissfully pleasant odor which lingered in the air, much like a graceful, care-free butterfly gliding delicately through the meadows. Loona took a solitary second to make out what the exact smell was, finding that it appeared to smell like rosemary concocted with lavender — a pleasant, wonderous smell to be sure, and one which seemed to queerly put the hellhound's otherwise troubled mind at ease.

But now was not the time to relax to soothing scents; now was the time to search for a man who would most likely be hostile to her presence. Loona began to examine the long hallway she now stood within; there were numerous individual doors on either side of the hallway which stretched down the entire length, all of which looked identical to one another if not for the numbers each one was designated. In total, Loona counted approximately twelve doors — that was twelve rooms that she would need to search to find a man that she didn't even know was present in the first place. A begrudged exhale left the disguised hellhound's lips as she got to work, wandering her way slowly through to one end of the hallway to start her search.

Once reaching the far end of the hallway, Loona opted to begin her search at the first door in the sequence; 'Room 1'. … But before she could do anything, she hesitated and froze in place. A considerable thought manifested in the forefront of Loona's mind; how the hell was she going to go about this? She couldn't exactly go around and knock on random people's doors, that would make everyone suspicious of her and blow her cover! She needed another approach… maybe she could—

Creeeak…

Mildly startling the intrusive visitor out of her plotting was the faint sound of door hinges creaking, prompting her to whirl around and stare down the opposite end of the lavish, florally scented hallway. It took Loona a few seconds to discover the source of the sound, but she soon realized that one of the doors — the one to that of 'Room 7' — was ever-so-slightly ajar and had been disturbed by a soft wind which had inexplicably passed through as though the culprit of said wind was a ghost. It was a curious wind, too; one which seemed to invite Loona to come and see what lies within the confines of this 'Room 7'. Maybe the room contained what she was seeking? Perhaps something else? There was only one way to find out.

After a second of hesitancy and tribulation, Loona slowly made her way over to the now slightly ajar door leading into the singled-out hotel room, sneaking her way across the hallway while pressing herself gently up against the wall. A strange sinking feeling arose within Loona's stomach, a feeling usually associated with doing something she wasn't supposed to. It was to be expected

anyway, afterall she was intruding into someone's private place of residency, and for the tenant of said room to discover her would mean a whole heap of trouble. Regardless of the feeling, Loona continued, before pushing the door inwards and at last inviting herself in with a growing feeling of anticipation.

Upon entering, she was quick to discover at first glance that her anticipation wasn't entirely warranted. As it turns out, 'Room 7' was nothing more than a simple yet homely set of two rooms; the main room which contained a sizable bed, a desk pressed up under the room's only window, a wooden chair with cushioning, and other decorative features dotted about the scene, as well as a small bathroom to the left of the entranceway. Much like the walls in the hallway and downstairs in the lobby, the room's walls were decorated with the same dark-green paint with plain dark oak wall panels lining the bottom half, stretching all the way around the room until meeting back up at the entrance doorway.

Just before Loona was about to lose all interest in this otherwise unsuspecting room, something on the eastern side of the room caught her eye. She stares at the peculiar display, discovering that the apparent tenant of this hotel room seemed to have tried his hand at decorating. Nestled on the eastern corner of the room resting atop a small table were a small series of icons — but not just any icons. The icons in question seemed to be those belonging to the Christian Faith, that fact given away with the presence of a small wooden cross nestled amidst them. They were small, perhaps no larger than the palm of Loona's hands and were made of fine wood, some of them featuring decorative engravings around the borders. Painted upon each and every one of them were depictions of what appeared to be Saints and various others in completely identical artistic styles to one another. One particular icon which caught Loona's eye was one which displayed a group of seven individuals, all of them being depicted with a radiant yellow halo behind their heads signifying something most important about their nature. Authored right above the figures was what appeared to be some sort of title; a description written in the Cyrillic alphabet.

Now Loona barely knew how to speak, let alone read a lick of Cyrillic. Afterall she hadn't seen this variant of written language until very recently when she was thrown head-first into the belly of this terrible beast of a situation. In spite of this however, for some inexplicable and daunting reason, something about the text 'spoke' to her. For whatever reason, Loona somehow knew what the words said, as if she harbored some alien knowledge she had never known before. A daunting chill ran up Loona's spine upon recognizing the weirdness of this foreign knowledge, understandably being creeped out as she silently translated the Cyrillic words into English.

"The Royal Passion-Bearers"

Suddenly Loona is pulled forcefully away from the corner of icons with her arms pulled behind her back! She grunts in a dreadful fright as she tries to resist against the pair of hands pinning her arms with brute strength, writhing like a frightened dog as she is then pinned face-first into the wall!

“ACK!! NNGH—AGH!!” Loona grunts while gnashing her teeth in pain, still trying to writhe her way out of the sudden confrontation; “Goddammit! Let me g—”

“Stop resisting! Stop it!” A guttural and booming familiar voice sounded off just behind Loona’s ears, a voice which she instantly recognized to her horror — it was Vasily.

“Get your hands off me!!” Loona protests once more with a growling and shrill voice! She tries desperately to kick her heels into Vasily’s shins which only proved to worsen her position, prompting the Private Investigator to kick Loona from off her feet before throwing her to the ground! The disguised hellhound grunts from the blunt impact of the floor all the while still trying to reason; “WAITWAITWAIT, Vasily! P-Please, let me go, I’ve got something to—”

Vasily was having none of these attempts to reason with him, prompting him to bark out a straightforward order; “SHUT UP!!” He bellows deafeningly; “What in Hell are you doing in my room?!”

“NGAH–!! I’ve been trying to find you, goddammit!!” Loona exclaims fearfully, all the while still trying to struggle against the weight pinning her face-first into the ground; “I-I need your help with something!!”

“Oh, you’ll get my help!” Vasily remarks with a cold and intimidating tone; “You’re coming with ME is what my help is!”

“NONONO, WAIT FOR FUCK SAKE, JUST LISTEN TO ME!!” The intruder screeches desperately once more though to no avail, feeling as her wrists are tied together with what felt like a length of cable tie!

With her hands now bound together behind her back, Loona feels herself being picked up and sat forcefully back-first against the wall! A look of intense fear and anger gleamed in Loona’s eyes as she found a pistol aimed directly at her face, the wielder of the weapon looming over her like a broad monolith adorning a lengthy beige coat. She watches with abstract fear and distress as Vasily reaches for a radio which was holstered just underneath his coat, raising the device up to his mouth while pressing a button with intention to speak.

Vasily radios in; “Hello, Mister Pearson, you there? It’s Vasily!”

…But there was no reply.

He tries again, the gun in his left hand still aimed directly at Loona's face; "Hello?? Mister Pearson, are you there?!"

…Nothing. The radio was dead silent, if not completely non-functional, as if by some inexplicable miracle.

"BLYAT!" The dysfunctional radio is then pelted across the room and shatters on impact with the wall! Loona winces fearfully while staring up at the ferocious man towering before her, his face wearing a look of professional contempt as he growls; "Come with me, I'm taking you in!"

"NO, WAIT!!" Loona further protests in vain, struggling helplessly as she is picked back up onto her feet and ushered hastily towards the wide open door. Luckily she manages to push her right foot up against the doorframe, halting any further advancement at the expense of making Vasily even more forceful than he already was.

Vasily growls angrily while trying to fight against Loona's unexpected strength; "I said stop resisting! You are only making things worse for yourself!!"

"And I said LISTEN!!" Loona screams right back, before lurching her head back which hits Vasily straight in his face! The blunt impact of Loona's head causes the Private Investigator to lurch back in pain, loosening his grip from the intruder which allows her to break free! Naturally Loona desperately wanted to flee the scene, but on account of her mission and the fact that her hands were tied together, she knew she couldn't! This time, she would have to use her words to get out of this quickly deteriorating confrontation.

"WAIT PLEASE I BEG YOU, STOP!!" Loona begs desperately, standing as still as possible and ceasing her attempts to flee. Her wife and desperate eyes gazed uncompromisingly at Vasily who once more had his pistol drawn towards her; "Please, just hear me out! I-I'll cooperate, you just have to listen to me!"

"What is there to listen to, huh?!" Vasily barks right back, his voice echoing throughout the entire room like the roar of rolling thunder; "You ran away, assaulted good officers, and now you're intruding in my room! I won't stand for this for any lo—"

“Mikhail sent me to see you!” The words tumbled haphazardly out of Loona’s mouth in a desperate bid to get the Russian man to listen.

Vasily looked puzzled, though his eyes and expression were still sharp as a blade; “Mikhail? Who the hell is ‘Mikhail’??”

“Mikhail Antonov!” Loona suddenly blurts out as beads of nervous sweat trickle down the length of her brow; “He was your great-grandfather, r-right?!”

“...How the hell do you know that name? How do you— who have you been talking to?!” It seemed as though the intruder’s last ditch effort to pacify Vasily through means of word appeared to work, the middle-aged man’s eyes flickering with a sudden sense of alienating familiarity.

After letting out a shaky breath to calm herself, Loona spoke further while maintaining her deescalating stance; “Okay, listen! I-I know it sounds nuts, but I spoke to him last night in a dream! H-He sent for me to… argh— t-to come find you, and get you to help us with something! He said you would be staying here!”

An intense and oppressive silence filled the room as the intense standoff fell quiet, the only sound emanating from either party was the bated sound of Loona’s panicked breathing. Vasily continued to stare intently with a look of disdain yet growing curiosity, the pistol still drawn towards the intruder’s chest if push truly came to shove. Not a word was spoken throughout the gridlock, the Private Investigator’s eyes staunchly fixated on Loona’s face like he was staring deep into the deepest parts of her soul. Eventually Vasily gestures with the pistol gripped in his right hand, nonverbally urging Loona to continue speaking.

A glimmer of hope that maybe she had a chance to control the situation glowed in Loona’s eyes, proceeding to explain herself further while mentally fighting against the stress; “He said he was a… a-a Priest, or a Monk, or something like that, and that h-he died during some Civil War… i-is that right??”

“…Yes he did,” Vasily intently replies, his mouth slightly agape with a hint of confoundedness while his eyes stayed coldly staring and underneath his furrowed brow; “He was in the Volunteer Army under General Drozdovsky. The Bolsheviks executed him while my great-grandmother fled through Sevastopol. … How do you know these things, woman?”

“Oh my God— he told me! He told me himself!” Loona exclaims suddenly, feeling as though she was repeating herself; “H-He also said some other things!”

The Russian man raised his brow slightly with intrigue; “Such as?”

A dry lump brought about by nervousness formed in Loona’s throat, one which she swallows shakily before answering in an unsure manner; “…He, uh… h-he said that something happened between you and Victor Malloy, that he took your… y-your daughter away from y—”

Loona lets out a terrified yelp when she hears the metallic click of the pistol’s hammer being pulled back, fear rising uncontrollably within her as she watches Vasily’s face wretch into a deep scowl! It was more than obvious that what she had just revealed she knew was the equivalent of opening Pandora’s box. The gun-wielder hissed as he got uncomfortably close to Loona’s face; “You’re playing a very dangerous game, woman! How DARE you bring that up with me!! HOW DO YOU KNOW ALL THIS?!”

“PLEASE, JUST LISTEN!!” Loona begs helplessly; “I-I need you to, just for once just listen!!”

“I HAVE been listening!!” Vasily snarls right back; “How about this — how about YOU tell ME something, because I know you know I’m onto you… I’ll ask again, from yesterday — Where is Mister Steele?”

Finally Loona breaks, the unbearable pressure to keep her secret too tough to bear; “He’s with me!! He’s been in hiding with me for the past week!”

Now this managed to take Vasily by surprise, the contents of the confession managing to puzzle him; “‘In hiding’, what do you mean ‘in hiding’?”

“As in I’ve been protecting him!” Loona exclaimed, feeling yet another spark of hope that just maybe she was finally getting Vasily to see reason; “He almost died for God’s sake, I saved his life! Victor Malloy, he’s been trying to kill him for who knows how long, and he’s still after him! H-He’s now after me, too!”

Upon hearing this almost desperate elaboration, Vasily’s face began metamorphosing, softening from the look of distinct, professionalist, and stalwart anger to that of quiet reservation, though his

gun was still drawn towards Loona just in case. To the detective's prisoner's alerted attention, she notices his gaze beginning to drift off into unfocused deliriousness, his dark blue eyes shifting towards a singular spot on the wall where Loona's back was pressed against. Soon the unfocused episode subsides when Vasily acts on a series of blinks, his focus finally returning to his captive. His voice was softened and inquisitive as he questioned; "How can that be? Vasily died nigh on almost two months ago. T-They found his body in the woods, I saw his cadaver for myself."

"I know he's dead! B-But when he arrived in Hell, he still ordered an attempt on Jim's life!" Loona exclaims emphatically, all the while grunting from the pressure put on her wrists from the cable tie; "That's why I need your help! You KNOW Malloy, you traced him down in the.. nineties, o-or something! When he was in that.. U-Union, was it??"

"No, no, the Union was dissolved by the late nineties. But yes, you are correct for the most part," Vasily confirms with his thick-accented voice still softened and thoughtful, gesturing his hand in a dismissive wave to emphasize the correction. There was a look of curious wonder in his gaze as he examined Loona, as if something about the eccentric-looking woman intrigued him; "I was put on Victor Malloy's case from Nineteen-Ninety-Five onwards. He was a former… 'Painters and Dockers Union' member, one of the ones involved in most of their… criminal activities. At that time, I was still living in New South Wales in a City called Bowral, so the State Police down there asked me to help them with this case that was about to run cold — something about a list of murders which they felt as though were connected to a man known as 'Victor Malloy', or "Mad Mick" as some referred to him as. Naturally I obliged, they made me sign a confidentiality form, and I got to work."

"By Nineteen-Ninety-Seven, the case was still at a dead-end because the Police were more focused on other more pressing cases by that point. I was about to give up with it and call it a day after two straight years of nothing… But that was until I found someone who was more than willing to talk about "Mad Mick" — Mark 'Chopper' Read. I met him in November of Nineteen-Ninety-Seven when he was still in prison for shooting a man, he agreed to talk about Victor. I asked 'Chopper' how he knew Victor, and that set him off on a tangent about him. He went on about how he was an "Utter scumbag" and a "Plain evil bastard with no morals" who was into "Some weird occultist shit" — his words, not mine. Anyhow I let him get it out of his system, and eventually 'Chopper' reveals that he met Victor in Melbourne the decade prior but neither of them got along with each other. They went on one hit together against a drug-dealer who refused to pay his debts, and that confrontation ended with Victor slitting the drug-dealer's throat in front of his clueless wife. According to 'Chopper', he told him off for doing that, and that dissolved into them fistfighting which resulted in 'Chopper' knocking Malloy out, who then drove him home and left him unconscious on his front doorstep."

For whatever reason which was unknown to Loona, she watches as a faint smirk spreads across his lips which were veiled by his bushy graying mustache, though his eyes appeared sad. Whether the smile was brought about by the story of blissful Karma being delivered to the man that killed his daughter, or maybe something else entirely, was up to Loona's meagrest of guesses. That weary

look in the Private Investigator's eyes — it reminded Loona so much of that same, sad, weary look in his Great-Grandfather's eyes, proving without a shred of doubt that the Cossack gene stayed unwavering in his family in spite of the decades gone by. A family history of pain, struggle, and exile, all personified into one living patriarchal figure, one which time and luck seemed to punish severely.

After a few seconds of dry smirking, Vasily clears his throat before continuing; "So then I ask Mister Read if he was connected to the murders I was investigating. He says that yes, Victor was, but there wasn't enough evidence to show that he was guilty for it — though there was another way to put him in prison. I asked him what that was, and he said that I can absolutely pull him up on charges of attempted murder and assault. 'Chopper' goes on to say that if I went to his house, I would find an abundance of things to prove him guilty with, for at that time Malloy wasn't too careful with getting rid of evidence with things such as weapons and the likes — he liked them too much to get rid of them. So anyway, I do what 'Chopper' says. I acquire myself a search warrant, and myself and two Police Officers stroll up to his house, and sure enough we find it; a homemade rifle and two steel baseball bats, all three of them connected to the assault of a Twenty-Seven-Year-Old woman named 'Nora Pendergast'. He's arrested on the spot, and the following week we manage to sentence him to Two, measly, God-forsaken years in prison. … That should've been the end for the story between me and Victor Malloy. … As I'm sure you've figured out by now, it wasn't."

Once again, that look of sadness appeared to grow within Vasily's averted dark blue eyes, his mouth slightly agape as he let out a depressing, guttural sigh. He mutters something under his breath which sounded to be along the lines of "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me", before refocusing his gaze on an attentive Loona and muttering; "He killed my daughter. I know he did. She didn't shoot herself, I know she didn't. … But I had no way to prove it at the time. … She still calls my name, beckons for me to come and save her beyond the grave — 'papa', she always says. It's like she can't move on."

Loona's own expression became remorseful as she responded quietly; "I-I'm so sorry."

"'Sorry' won't bring her back from the dead," Vasily says sorrowfully, at last holstering the pistol underneath his beige coat which had long since fallen to his side; "Nor will it put her to rest. … So you say that Victor Malloy is still active, yes? Even beyond death and his day of judgment?"

"Yes," Loona replies, her look firm and full of honesty; "I've been mentally tortured by him for days now! Please, Vasily, I'm—... I'm begging you to help me."

Vasily let out a forlorn sigh as he stared gingerly at Loona, his eyebrow ever-so-slightly pitched upwards; "You keep saying that you need my help. With what?"

Loona swallowed with her restrained parched throat before explaining; “Y-You said that “Chopper” guy mentioned something about Malloy being in the occult, right?? You probably won’t believe me, but he actually is! He’s been in contact with all sorts of evil shit, and that’s why he wants Jim dead — he’s after a sacrifice!”

Something within the back of Vasily’s eyes suddenly falls into place, clicking together like the joints, pulleys, and locks of an automaton. Loona’s eyes met firmly with the Private Investigator’s who returned the look of undeniable seriousness. After a while of thinking, Vasily finally turns Loona around and cuts off the length of cable tie binding her wrists together. The relief to the disguised hellhound’s wrists was instant as she rubs them to get rid of the pain put upon them. That’s when she hears Vasily order from behind her; “Take me to Mister Steele.”

Twelve Hours Until The Ritual…

Home Stretch

The midnight black four-wheel-drive glided across the asphalt road as Loona sat in awkward silence beside the broad-shouldered driver, unsure of what to say. A rosary clattered and swayed behind the rear-view mirror it hung loosely upon, the motion of which was the focus point for Loona's wandering and nervously shifting eyes. Neither she nor Vasily had exchanged a word between them since departing 'The Duke of Wellington Hotel', as an intense pressure in the air brought about by the aftermath of their confrontation was preventing them from doing so. This nonverbal status quo was about the o change, the 'change' of which arriving in the form of a question.

"So just down here, left turn?" Vasily asks in a blunt and no-nonsense tone, his eyes firmly fixated on the road before him.

"…W-What?" Loona answers half-heartedly, having been in a state of fluctuating dazed subconsciousness.

"Do I go down this road, yes or no??" Vasily demands while raising his voice, his patience for mistakes being next to none.

"Okay okay, yes you do!" Loona answers properly with significantly more awareness; "Fuck! Give me a break, will you?"

"And why should I do that?" The driver abruptly asks, his voice flat and indifferent to the request put upon him.

"Oh I don't know, maybe out of courtesy??" Loona answers with a hint of snark, obviously taking offense over the Russian man's mannerisms towards her.

Vasily couldn't help but raise his brow to the suggestion; "What have you done for me to warrant courtesy? As far as I'm aware, you're still under my suspicions."

This left Loona almost speechless; "Wh— Suspicions?! Based on what??"

“Think of it this way, seeming that you want to be dense,” Vasily remarks with a light jab at his passenger’s so far rigid behavior; “How am I supposed to know that what you are leading me to is what you say? How is it that I can trust someone who assaulted two Police Officers just the day before?”

Quite understandably, Loona became adamant about her innocence; “Okay, but that was self defense!”

Vasily let out an almost dismissive and mocking snort, only serving to annoy Loona further; “Hm! Some ‘self defense’ that was. You call injuring two men who were only doing their duty ‘self defense’?”

Loona turns her head to look directly at the driver, squinting her eyes with bafflement; “What the hell was I supposed to do, just take it?”

“You could’ve cooperated with us and save all of us the trouble,” Vasily rebuked firmly, as staunch on his conviction as Loona was on her own; “Now if I knew any better, I would be driving you all the way back to the Police Station and your wrists would still be in cable ties. But alas, I am an old fool, and I am now driving you to apparently go see Mister Steele who you insist is still alive.”

“Listen. I promise you, Jim is alive,” Loona insists with absolute certainty; “We set up camp in a clearing on top of the mountain and everything.”

Vasily silently acknowledges his passenger’s promise with a slow and deliberate nod, though his eyes were narrowed as if in thought. Finally he speaks his mind; “Then what about the blood in his home?”

“He got shot,” Loona was quick to explain; “As I said, I saved his life before he had the chance to bleed to death.”

“Then how did you treat his wounds? Multiple gunshot wounds aren’t a small thing to heal.”

Loona shot the driver a look of incredulity, finding the question somewhat stupid; “Uh, a medic kit? What did you think I used?”

“Just making sure,” Vasily flatly replies, flicking on the indicator to turn right as he halts his vehicle at the last major intersection in town. A large semi-trailer truck clattered on by in the northerly direction, and once the intersection was clear, the Private Investigator took this as an opportunity to finally turn right, thus exiting the township. The sound of the engine grew louder as the driver accelerated the four-wheel-drive to a healthy Eighty Kilometers per Hour. With the open road now ahead of them, Vasily speaks up again; “So at the first dirt track that appears, I turn left?”

“Yep,” Loona simply replies, shifting her eyes to look outside into the scenic bushland, noticing that the day was quickly becoming overcast with many clouds.

The black four-wheel-drive bopped and swayed with each inconsistency in the asphalt road it passed over, the dull guttural sound of the petrol engine whirring as it sped along, maintaining the speed limit with great precision. Once more Loona’s eyes began to wander off into the never-never, letting her own consciousness slip away into blank-mindedness so as to take a break from thinking overtime. This moment to lose herself for just a moment didn’t last long as another question was thrown her way.

“So who are you exactly?”

The delivery of this question from Vasily sounded more like a demand to understand rather than that of genuine passive curiosity. It sounded as if the driver was genuinely puzzled by Loona’s presence, and what exactly her connections were with the man who had been missing for the past week to fortnight.

Loona blinks as she momentarily processes the question, coming up with an answer; “What do you mean, what are you asking exactly?”

“As in, well… who are you to Mister Steele? Are you an acquaintance, or otherwise?”

“I’m a friend, yeah,” Loona obliges to casually affirm, swiping some of her hair which had fallen in front of her face.

Vasily let out a guttural, yet soft, monotone grunt in acknowledgment to Loona’s ‘truth’, scratching the side of his wrinkled face before asking a follow-up question; “How did you two meet? You two don’t seem like the likeliest of friends.”

“It’s a long story. I don’t feel like talking about it,” Loona groans, having long since grown tired of explaining the same thing over and over to people.

“I can respect that,” Vasily concedes after covering his mouth for a phlegmy cough; “Errghh… You know, if I knew this case was going to be as convoluted as its thus far turning out to be, I wouldn’t have taken it.”

“Guess it’s too late to go back now,” Loona remarks with a defeated sigh, the action of which ran deep into her lungs like a blast of air running through a cavernous ravine; “To be honest with you, I feel the same way.”

“How do you mean?”

“…My life is in danger,” Loona soberly reveals; “A-As I said back at the hotel, both of our lives are in danger because of this. Because I had the courage to save a friend’s fucking life.”

An almost scolding look emerged on Vasily’s face as his mouth opened as though to scold his passenger for swearing, though the words died on his lips. Ultimately it seemed as though he understood the gravity of the situation, his eyes shifting in thought of the implications this all had on her prospects of living in what thus far sounded to be a life-threatening situation. Loona notices the change in look, leading her to think that perhaps she had finally gotten through to him, the realization hitting potently like a tonne of bricks.

Eventually after much delay, Vasily allows himself to solemnly remark; “Well that’s very commendable — In saving his life, not the part of putting your life on the line, I mean. It’s very selfless of you, and for that you deserve praise.”

“Yeah, well. I did what I had to do,” Loona remarks with a drawn-out sigh; “I guess I was just returning the favor in saving him, he did the same for me.”

The last part of Loona’s honest word piqued Vasily’s attention, who promptly asks with curiosity; “In what way?”

“Again, it’s a very long story. I don’t feel like explaining,” Loona insists for the second time that trip, shaking her head weakly before spotting the turnoff for the dirt road leading up towards the hilly and mountainous divide.

It took no time at all for the driver to react to the quickly approaching turnoff, steadily slowing the vehicle down to an adequate speed before flicking the indicator to signal ‘left’. At once, the left indicator’s bulb begins to tick rhythmically, the faint sound of the indicator working as it should, ticking within its calibrated beat like that of perfectly timed and intricate clockwork. Soon the ride becomes significantly more rough and uneven as the four-wheel-drive’s tires make contact with the weathered surface of the dirt road, the suspension creaking faintly with each pothole and inconsistency they rolled over. The first part of the road cut through a wide open field of grass with little shrubbery — something which would change on the second leg where the wide open plains gave way to dense shrubbery and trees as the road winded up the range. Loona stares at the dusty road before them, watching as the overcast becomes more and more so with some of the aforementioned clouds displaying patches of darker grays. An uneasy feeling suddenly arose as she felt something stabbing her — a set of eyes. She shudders before finally noticing that Vasily had just shot her a side-glance of analytical suspicion, the look in his eyes indicating that he was piecing something together.

The discomfort soon became too much to stay silent, prompting Loona to pivot her head towards the driver and giving him a confused look; “What?”

“Let me ask you something,” Vasily drawled thoughtfully, averting his eyes back towards the road ahead; “Would you know anything about a large… dog species residing around here?”

A chill ran up Loona’s spine upon hearing the words hit her at force. Something was up with the way the question was phrased. She responds with moderately genuine cluelessness; “What are you talking about?”

“I’m not sure if you saw,” Vasily went on to say in that same drawn-out voice as if still in thought; “But I went to Mister Steele’s home roughly a week ago from today. When I did, I noticed something leading from the doorway and into the living room — a continuous set of mud-ridden paw prints from that of a canine, but they were much larger than usual. I took a sample, sent it off to forensics. They said they couldn’t identify the animal which made them, only that they were from a large canine species. Would you know anything about that?”

“Huh? What does any of that have to do with me?” Loona asks genuinely, though that awful spine-chilling feeling remained prominent in her mind.

Vasily gave off a shrug; “I didn’t necessarily say it did. All I’m asking is whether or not you know anything about it.”

Now Loona truly felt something was up, trying to wrap her head around what exactly this aging man was talking about. Suddenly it dawned on her, sending an awful realization to shoot through her body like a shockwave — those were her paw prints he was talking about. She must’ve tracked a trail of dirt and mud from outside in her mad dash to find Jim in time. After all this time, it hadn’t even dawned on her that she might’ve left some evidence of her presence behind! How could’ve she been so reckless?!

Loona’s concerns were certainly not alleviated when Vasily continued. The middle-aged man clears his throat gutturally before adding; “There were also traces of what appeared to be hair from a dog. It was thick and colored white and dark gray, like a husky’s coat.”

Alarm bells blared loudly in Loona’s at this point who tried to dismiss the topic; “Wow, r-really? That’s uh, heheh, tha-that’s definitely something! Hey, is it getting hot in here or what?”

Vasily blatantly ignores his passenger’s attempt to divert the conversation; “So I take that small cluster of white and dark gray hair back to where I’m staying, there at the ‘Duke of Wellington’. Try as I might to figure it out for myself, I can’t figure out for the life of me which animal it’s come from. … So I decide to call my sister’s husband, he’s more well-read on mysterious things and such. You know what he says to me? He says, from the things that I tell him… that I may be dealing with a ‘Hellhou—”

“What are you getting at with me, huh? Why are you telling me all this?” Loona was alarmingly hasty with her sudden question, clearly rattled by the subject matter. A bead of nervous sweat rolled down Loona’s brow as she glared at the driver, increasingly aware of the very real possibility that Vasily knew what she was. In a paralyzingly dreadful way, the possibility of this man of Faith knowing what she was, terrified her — it was bad enough that she was sitting in his car with a prayer rope, dangling and swaying with an odd trance in front of her face, as if it was taunting with its own form of sentience.

Once more Vasily shoots a side-eye towards Loona’s direction, staring intently at her with what was apparent to Loona to be intense suspicion. He opens his mouth as though preparing himself to speak, once more averting his stone-cold gaze towards the road ahead, letting out a calculated deliberate breath and drawling; “There’s something familiar about you. I know there is. … Yes. … Something strangely familiar.”

In a desperate attempt to “prove” that she shouldn’t be under any suspicion, Loona decides to assert herself; “Okay, you listen to me. I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, got it? I don’t know! I don't know anything about dog hair, or paw prints, or anything like that. Alright? You’re asking the wrong woman!”

“We’ll see,” Vasily quickly responds, his tone flat yet imposing and growling like that of a great wildcat.

Loona didn’t know what to say to that, any comeback she attempted to make died on her lips before finally giving up. Unlike in other verbal altercations she had been a part of, Loona knew that she couldn’t win against the man to her right who was staunch in his conviction. The car continued to rattle up the dirt track as the open plains gave way to dense tree cover, marking the beginning of the ascent up the mountain. Thus there was silence as nothing else of value was left to be said, the only sound emitting being the faint rumble of the engine fighting against gravity and terrain all at once. Shattering the silence in a rudely interruptive way was Loona’s phone blaring loudly in her jacket’s pocket, slightly muffled by the maroon fabric. Loona picks it up at once, discovering that the mystery caller had a ten-digit number and seemed to be local.

She accepts the call before holding the phone up to her ear; “Yeah, hello?”

“Loona, it’s Jim here.”

Loona grins with slight awkwardness, her eyes shifting towards the driver whose attention seemed to be locked on the call taking place; “Oh, Jim! Uhh, h-hey! How’s it going up there?”

“...Yeah, it’s alright. You okay there, matey? You sound kinda nervous.”

“Nervous? Nah, I’m fine, I promise! Everything’s fine!” Loona tries her best to keep her composure, turning her eyes back towards Vasily who seemed to be listening intently to the conversation with keen interest.

“Righto, whatever you say. Are you coming back yet? It’s been about three hours or so. Where are ya?”

“I’m coming back up now,” Loona immediately informs, glancing back towards the driver whose eyes were still periodically moving between the ascending road and his passenger; “Hey listen, uh… I’m in a car, right?”

Jim stagnates from speaking for a second, the sound of nature filling the space where his voice would occupy, before at last answering; *“Yeah right? Loona, mate, where is this heading?”*

“Before you say anything, no I didn’t steal it,” Loona was hasteful to affirm with utmost sincerity; “I’m being, uh, driven up.”

“Driven up??”

Loona visibly winces as she rubs the nervous sweat away from her brow. She continues her explanation in earnest; “Remember that Russian guy I told you about yesterday?”

“Oh Jesus Christ, Loona, don’t tell me you got arrested again!”

“Nonono, Jim— I didn’t! I didn’t, I promise!” The disguised hellhound emphatically assures; “He just wants to see you! H-He also agreed to help us with this whole mess with Victor Malloy.”

Suddenly Vasily decides to verbally intervene, clearing his throat to acquire Loona’s attention. This approach works as she snaps her eyes to her immediate right towards the driver, the driver then promptly asking; “Can you put him on speaker for me? I wish to speak to him.”

“Uh.. O-Okay, sure,” Loona complies in earnest, quickly pressing a button on her phone screen to enable Vasily to join in the conversation. With the simple click of a button, the sounds of nature emanated through the speakers of Loona’s phone, effectively signaling to the Private Investigator that it was now his time to contribute.

After allowing Loona to turn the phone towards him, Vasily allows himself to speak up; “Hello? Mister Steele, is that you?”

“Yeah it is, who is this?”

“This is Vasily Antonov, I’ve been assigned to your case by the Queensland Police for the past fortnight,” the Private Investigator informs with utmost authority and confidence in his position; “How are you feeling?”

A burst of rushing air briefly distorts the audio on Jim’s end of the line, sounding as though he had just exhaled with confused astonishment; *“Wh–What? What do you mean ‘the past fortnight’, how long have I been gone for?”*

The utmost sincere confusion in the young man’s voice was a cause for Vasily to abstain from talking. There was something so genuine about the way his voice was carried which suggested something was truly up with the nature of this already strange case. As he wrestles with the steering wheel over a particularly uneven patch of dirt road, the driver informs Jim once more; “To the date, the missing person’s case has been current from anywhere between ten to fourteen days.”

“What?! Bullshit!” Jim exclaims in utter disbelief; *“I-It hasn’t been more than a week, has it??”*

Loona winces upon hearing this, realizing herself that time had indeed gotten the better of not only Jim, but herself as well — though not at the fault of herself. As a matter of fact, the way that ‘time’ works differs in a rather inexplicable way in hell in contrast to human world time. Human World time is linear and runs at a steady and even pace, with every second, every minute, and every hour flowing autonomously and with utmost intricate precision. In contrasting comparison to Human World time, time in Hell runs differently to that of its “northerly” counterpart.

Now of course, Hell had the seven-day week and twenty-four hour days, but when timed with the Human World equivalent, significant periodic fluctuations can be observed. Any and all attempts to synchronize Hell time with Human World time ultimately has ended in failure, but from the little which some have figured — including Loona herself — Hell time (HT) seemed to fluctuate randomly in and out of synchronization with Human World time (HWT). On some days, Twenty-Four Hours in HWT would be Twenty-Four Hours in HT, whilst on another day the time difference would be, for example, twelve hours, thus Twenty-Four Hours in HT being the equivalent of one-and-a-half days in HWT. A Complicated and often disorientating conundrum to be sure, and one which Loona didn’t necessarily put too much thought into for the sake of her own sanity. Luckily for Loona it seemed as though for this last crucial day, Hell time perfectly aligned with Human World time down to a tee.

Vasily meekly furrows his brow with confusion before shaking off the question — there were more pressing matters to address; “Nevermind that, sir. I must ask you; is this young lady with me telling the truth?”

“In regards to what?”

“As in have you been with her from the day which you were reported missing?”

“Yeah, I suppose so. Hey look, where are you right now?”

“We’re around halfway up the mountain as I speak,” Vasily asserts as he wrestles the steering wheel around to make a difficult hairpin turn, the road ever continuing to ascend; “Just wait there and I’ll be up there to meet you soon enough. Again, stay where you are.”

“I’m not planning on moving either way,” Jim reassures; *“So wait on, is Loona in trouble with you lot at all?”*

Vasily gives this question a moment of consideration, briefly glancing and making eye contact with Loona before fixing his eyes straight ahead once more; “With the stunt that she pulled back in town yesterday, Mister Steele, I do reckon she would be in considerable trouble.”

Loona’s face contorts into a slight grimace as she hears Jim mutter something along the lines of *“Oh God…”* from just underneath his breath. Deep down however, Loona figured that “Oh God” was a more than appropriate reaction to anything and everything which has happened thus far.

After making this remark to himself from underneath his breath, Jim pipes up his voice to speak clearly once again; *“Uh, hey Loona, you there?”*

“Yeah, I’m here,” Loona promptly responds, having already anticipated the need to join back into the conversation beforehand.

“So the clearing up here doesn’t actually link up with the dirt track,” Jim earnestly informs; *“It’s about a hundred meters or less away from it if I had to guess. The road ends at a large clearing of its own which’ll allow just enough space to turn around. To get up here, you’ll need to walk north up the small incline there — that’s where the clearing is.”*

“Alright, got it,” Loona verbally signals that she understood; “How did you find that out?”

“Did a bit of scouting of my own,” Jim makes it known; *“Came across it when I decided to head down the southside a little.”*

Vasily nods slowly and intently, taking serious note of the directions which the previously missing man had just provided. As he does so, he slowly swings his vehicle around another tight hairpin turn to the right, a large overarching branch full of eucalyptus leaves brushing across the windscreen as the vehicle continues to sturdily climb. With an emotionless and serious tonality to his voice, Vasily delivers his final word to the previously “lost” bushman; “We’ll see you up there soon, sir. Give us ten minutes.”

Afterwards he nods very briefly in Loona’s direction, signaling for her to hang up the call, the passenger doing so without much hesitancy. The sounds of the six-cylinder engine and the sound of dirt shifting under the weight of tires fill the place where an exchange of voices took hold just seconds ago. Loona turns her head once more to look towards the driver with intent and cautious eyes, checking to see if he showed any signs of intending to speak any further to her. Judging by the stiffness in his sharp and oddly frightening gaze as he looked towards the road ahead, it seemed as if he had no such wishes. This in turn gave Loona some time to breathe and prepare for whatever next was to come; time which she much appreciated to the fullest of extents, for she knew it wouldn’t last much longer.

Before Loona knew it, the large black four-wheel-drive had arrived at the sizable clearing Jim had mentioned over the phone, the space of which had just enough room to make turning the car around slightly challenging yet entirely possible. The engine abruptly cuts off as Vasily turns the ignition key anti-clockwise before yanking it out of the ignition itself. Wasting no time at all, the driver swings the door open and hangs his right leg outside of the vehicle with intent to step out. Before he does, he freezes and turns to look back in Loona’s direction, who was now staring at him with her fullest attention.

This in turn gives him the opportunity to warn Loona once again, pointing a firm yet bent finger towards her; “I’ll warn you from now. You try anything on me, either of you, then you’re both dead. I’ll make sure of that. Do I make myself clear?”

Now usually Loona wasn’t so kind towards people who made threats against her, and any such gesture would prove fatal to whoever dared say it. This time however, she knew what her limits were, instead complying with Vasily’s firm and borderline bone-chilling instruction with an affirming, quiet nod, her eyes fixated on the stone-cold, beige-coated man with unwavering intent.

“Good. Let’s get going,” Vasily says at once, at last heaving himself out of the padded seat and stepping out into the seemingly endless tree-coated wilderness.

Loona follows suit, opening her own door and unbuckling her seatbelt in the process. She steps out into the biting chill of the mid-morning air, a soft wind blowing through the trees around her which coaxes them to sway elegantly in a fashion which makes them appear almost sentient. The unmistakable sound of the cocking of a pistol causes Loona to snap her head in Vasily’s direction, finding him briefly checking the rounds of ammunition that were currently loaded. A single unused round fell to the floor which the broad-shouldered man picked up with methodically alert movement, not once compromising his relatively imposing stature. With a steady hand, Vasily slips the pistol’s magazine out of the firearm itself, holding it firmly in his grasp while eyeing the bullets encased inside, like a mercenary admiring his prized deadly possessions. After this brief inspection, Vasily slides the magazine back into the pistol before then facing to the east. Loona watches with considerable intrigue as the middle-aged man then crosses himself — forehead, abdomen, right shoulder, left shoulder — repeating this action until he has done it thrice.

With this action now out of the way, he turns back towards Loona’s direction and asks abruptly, gesturing his hand towards where the terrain rose upwards; “He said just up this way, yes?”

“Y-Yeah, he, uh.. I think he did,” Loona confirms in earnest, beginning to follow alongside Vasily a few cautious feet apart, at once ascending up the steadily climbing embankment.

The air was as tense as it was undoubtedly cold around Loona as she steadily marched up the steep gradient, trying her best to catch up with Vasily’s own pace who seemed to be ascending with powerful, unwavering strides. It was the sheer pace that this ‘man on a mission’ was moving at which managed to catch Loona by surprise, finding herself steadily falling behind his quickened marching.

After nearly tripping over a small naturally felled tree, Loona grunts before calling out; “Hey! Wai — Ngh! Fuck— Wait up!”

“We do not have time to spend waiting,” Vasily barks right back as he ducks and weaves in between trees and their various low-hanging branches; “Didn’t you say that yourself back at the hotel?”

Loona let out a gruff sigh, knowing that Vasily was indeed correct. After snapping a low-hanging branch out of her pathway, she exclaims; “Yeah, I did! But what have you got to rush for? It’s not like you’re gonna miss him! I assure you, Jim isn’t going anywhere!”

“I don’t doubt that,” Vasily drawls through slightly bated breath from his own struggle against gravity; “I’m just seeing if he’s actually here as you say in the quickest amount of time. The sooner I find out he is, or perhaps isn’t, the less time is spent or wasted — that depends if you’re lying to me or not.”

“Oh my fucking— why would I lie to you?!”

“Because all you’ve done so far is escape custody, attack two officers, and then trespass into my hotel room. Understand that I still do not trust you. And I remind you once again, cease being argumentative with me.”

Regardless of whether she was tired of arguing or if she knew nothing she could say would convince Vasily otherwise, Loona decided to keep her mouth shut, instead looking up at the steadily approaching summit through the trees. It was clear from the steadily whisking plumes of light gray smoke that this had to be the campsite.

The sight of the approaching clearing before her was cause for Loona to call out; “Hey! Jim! Are you there?!”

A voice calls back from beyond the treeline; “Is that you, Loona?!”

“Yeah it’s me! I-I’m back!” Loona calls out earnestly, feeling herself slightly fatigued from the climb up; “I got that Russian guy with me! Looks like he’ll reach you before me, so don’t freak out!”

It seemed as though Vasily took this as an invitation to speak, with Loona hearing his booming guttural voice calling through the trees, perpetually getting closer to the clearing; “Mister Steele! How are you feeling?”

“Yeah, well, I’m still alive, aren’t I?” Loona hears Jim’s voice calling right back as she was now less than ten feet away from the makeshift campsite. As soon as she clears the monotonous maze of countless trees, Loona rests herself on a particularly sturdy trunk with her back pressed against it. She carefully observes as Jim — still dressed in his brown oilskin coat and dumb-looking flat cap — made serious talk with the beige-coated man standing a few feet before him. Right off the bat,

Loona could tell that was definitely talk of great seriousness, especially as Vasily began to gesture towards her recently acquired rifle laying neatly on the canvas beside her tent.

Soon, however, the lengthy conversation shifted towards Loona, with the intimidatingly postured Slav's authoritative hand gesturing directly towards her. Jim looks towards the disguised hellhound's current position as he waves his hands dismissively, seemingly trying to convince Vasily that Loona was innocent of any speculative wrongdoings. Loona becomes far more attentive as Vasily suddenly gestures for her to come over, an "order" which she chose to, perhaps reluctantly, abide by.

Soon as Loona was within direct earshot of the pair of men, she was hit with a rhetorical question from the observant Private Investigator, though he sounded somewhat disbelieving; "So this is what you two have been living in for up to a fortnight?"

"I wouldn't call it 'living', more 'surviving', but yeah," Loona affirms without any doubt in her voice, hoping to convince the questioner of what was a blatant lie.

The only 'response' Vasily provides is a half-hearted nod in acknowledgement, his eyes wandering around the campsite before once more being fixated on Loona's tent, more specifically her weapon. He points his crooked finger towards it, turning his sharp gaze back towards Loona; "And where did you get that from?"

"Someone gave it to me," Loona replies flatly.

"Who did?"

"He was a former right-hand man of Malloy's, pretty sure his name was 'Jack Foster' or something. He sent me a note and everything, saying that I could take his gun and use it."

Loona could practically see the individual gears turn within the very depths of Vasily's head through his faintly shifting eyes. It was as though he was processing the words the disguised hellhound had made known in order to comprehend their implications. All of a sudden his eyes widened with his brow furrowed with profound confusion and recognition.

Vasily's words were haphazard yet potent as he spoke with certainty about his words; "Ma'am, that cannot be possible. That couldn't have been Jack Foster, because Jack Foster has been dead for at least the past three to five years. I know that for a fact."

"I know he's dead," Loona emphatically asserts; "But that didn't stop me from speaking to him, nor did it stop him from delivering me that gun."

As soon as Loona states what she knew was complete and utter fact, Vasily's face turns into that of unnerved realization, his voice reflecting his view on the disguised hellhound's bold statement; "Young Lady, if you're confessing to me that you've made contact with the dead, I'm sorry but you are treading into very dangerous territory! What you are claiming is incredibly dangerous, do you understand??"

Loona couldn't help but shrug almost nonchalantly, somewhat unaffected by Vasily's very vocal concern; "Hey, it's up to you if you want to believe me or not. What I did or how we got to this stage doesn't matter. Can we focus on what's important now?"

"That's the thing, I'm inclined to believe you…" Vasily mumbles in a growling, thoughtful tone, rubbing the underside of his chin while practically staring right into Loona's soul with his almost weary gaze. This concentrated glance was only broken when the sound of distant thunder rumbled somewhere off to the west where the overcast cloud cover was darkest. Vasily looks into the direction it came from, squinting with a hardened wrinkled brow. He makes a quick observation; "Looks like it will rain soon."

Loona joins the Russian in gazing off towards the darkened clouds, quietly observing as they inch closer and closer towards the mountain range they stood upon. Indeed, it looked as though it was going to rain very soon, giving them limited time to pack up the camp in the luxury of staying dry. At that point Loona knew she would need to hurry things up, turning back to Vasily who she now found standing by the simmering campfire, the grayish-white smoke twirling around him with the wind.

"Hey, so, uh," Loona stammers almost hesitantly while approaching the middle-aged man, managing to grab his attention; "Are you gonna help us with this thing or what?"

Vasily hacks up an accumulation of spit in a phlegmy cough before spitting it into the fire to Loona's disgust, before turning to face his former detainee; "You keep saying you need my help in some form but you've never elaborated how you want me to help."

“O-Oh yeah,” Loona says in realization; “Guess I haven’t gotten the chance to elaborate yet.”

“Then go on,” Vasily insists, waving his hand towards Loona as an invitation to speak; “What kind of help are you asking from me?”

“Help! As in, meaningful physical help,” Loona elaborates at once; “I-I want— no, I NEED you to come and help us with this. We are only two people against who-knows-how-many other freaks exactly like Malloy, and tonight we need to fight them.”

Vasily furrows his brow while trying to understand what Loona was asking of him; “So you’re asking me to confront a whole… organized gang? Is that what you’re asking me to do, to put my life in danger?”

The choice of words that the Russian had used seemed to dampen Loona’s hopes of having proper physical assistance by a considerable margin. She protests; “What? No— I mean… Look, please, I’m begging you, just help us with this! You’re armed with a gun and so are we, we can take them on if we just work together!”

Once more the sound of the distant westward rolling thunder reverberates through the air, sounding off like the chime of an hourly church bell, heralding with great thunderous bass that the hours were surely passing by — a dreadful reminder which Loona knew all too well. Vasily’s piercing blue eyes were narrowed to an intensely pensive squint, the inner machinations of his mind ticking away as he thought of an answer.

Eventually after a painstakingly long while of relative silence, the pensive Russian speaks; “You know there’s an old saying amongst certain types of monks in Orthodox Christianity. It’s a saying as old as time and will always ring true — ‘Always Remember Death’. For the longest time and forevermore, I have always, and will continue to, remember death. It humbles to do so for foolish old men like me, you know? I remember it because through that rotten man, death came to my daughter. Her brothers and my wife miss her so dearly. … If it is help in that form which you seek, then I suppose I am obligated to do so.”

Loona’s pessimism was quick to vanish upon hearing these words, causing her to feel as though the weight of the world had once again been lifted right off her weary shoulders! For the first time since this horrible nightmare began, Loona felt like things were finally falling into place in her favor.

She watches as Vasily pivots around and gestures his hands towards the pair of tents, asking; “Do you need me to help pack these away?”

“N-No, I think I’m good!” Loona assures with a hint of optimistic enthusiasm, the lift in her spirits feeling like a complete and utterly euphoric release from the reins of despair.

Once again almost on cue, the faintly growing sound of distant thunder grew a few meager decibels louder, the darker patches of overcast clouds marching across the sky in eerily organized columns. Determined to get things wrapped up as soon as possible, Loona strides over to her tent and begins quickly dismantling it, practically tearing off the draping canvas off the tent poles and folding it up as neatly as she could. As she finishes folding the hefty canvas into a large neat square, Loona overhears Vasily conversing with Jim, asking more mundane questions about his state of health and his general mental well-being.

Half an hour passed on by on its leisurely second-by-second course, and by this time the vast majority of the campsite had been stowed away in the same condition as they arrived. Loona swings her bulky camping pack over her shoulders with a tremendous heave, threading her pale-skinned arms through the two thick straps with her hands firmly gripped on them. So as to mitigate the risk of her maroon jacket being torn from the sheer weight of the bag, Loona had resorted to tying it snugly around her waist by the sleeves. With both campers now ready to depart and the darker clouds in the overcast sky almost over their heads, Vasily with both of their wrapped-up rifles escorted them both back down the gradient back towards his pitch-black four-wheel-drive with a slow march. Once they had all reached the large, bulky vehicle, Vasily instructs both Loona and Jim to store all of their gear at the far back, an instruction which the both of them abide by. Loona was the last to jump into the car, finally making her way to the right side to take her spot in the rear passenger seat. Just as she opens the door, something makes her freeze.

There was a feeling, one which was unmistakable in its paralyzing power — the feeling of being watched.

Suddenly Loona spins herself around to peer alertly into the surrounding bushland, only to find nothing except countless trees and long, gently swaying grasses.

Snapping the suddenly alert Loona out of her moment of apprehension was Vasily’s booming voice from within the car, having since wound down his window; “Hey! Are you coming in or not?”

“Yeah… I’m coming,” Loona cautiously says, still staring with full attention into the surrounding wilderness as she got into the passenger’s seat, shutting the door once she was fully inside.

As the car roars back to life and begins making its way back down the tree-veiled dirt road, Loona couldn’t help but feel that she had seen something. It might’ve just been a hallucination, but she could’ve sworn that at the very moment she had turned around, before it vanished a millisecond later, standing way off into a particularly thick accumulation of trees was a figure — a tall, pitch-dark, spindly figure.

Ten Hours Until The Ritual…

(Act IV) Pandemonium - I

Within the towering and gigantic walls of Stolas' gargantuan palace estate, the hurried sound of urgently clattering footsteps echoed throughout, shattering the relative soothing quiet which filled the otherwise vacant halls on most normal days — today, however, was certainly far from normal. A lone physician from the Sloth ring, donned with a long white coat and a clipboard clasped in his hands, made brisk strides down towards Stolas' room, his hasty movement being observed by an increasingly concerned Octavia who stood alone within the kitchen doorway. It had been almost two full days since the palace had ordered the Sloth ring to send their best specialists in hopes that it would improve the owl prince's health in any way shape or form — to everyone closest to Stolas' concern, including Octavia's own, it hadn't. In fact, it seemed as though he was once again starting to get worse.

Throughout the generations which had passed in the many lines of royalty, rarely had there been such a grave and uncertain time as this. In fact, the goetia had enjoyed relative stability and security when it came to their general states of health, thanks to the treatments and medicines which would be laundered to them through their copious wealth and many connections — some of them shady. As the old saying often went, money cannot buy you everything, and that most certainly applied to health, such an example of this all-too-true saying currently being made in the case of a still very poorly Stolas.

Because of the beyond baffling mystery illness which had rendered the owl prince completely bedridden, certain whispers had begun to pipe up within the palace walls, ones which were hardly encouraging. These weren't any old whispers either; these were rumors. Equally horrid to the very word 'rumor' was the nature of them — rumors of conspiracies, assassination attempts, and poisonings which had finally gone right. Already there were rumors of who this apparent double-crossing poisoner might've been — The Cook? The Cleaner? The Physicians themselves? If there was any truth to these rumors in the first place, it was certainly hard to tell who exactly the culprit might've been.

Though many mouths and minds were quick to assume and entertain aforementioned rumors, no mind was truly paying attention to a growingly concerned Octavia who was truly amidst it all. The young owl princess, who was just as frighteningly clueless to her father's health as the doctors themselves, had been listening into almost each and every conversation which had been going on between the palace's main staff. Of course there were many words which were being spoken between them, all of them equally worrying as the last, if not more. Mostly it was talks of the management of dull old bureaucracy and other administrative issues, and how some of them might need to be passed into Octavia's inexperienced hands.

Out of all of the talks being had, one subject made her blood run cold in grave fear for her father's health — There was serious talk of establishing a Regency in case the owl prince… 'succumbed',

to put it lightly.

This only served to dampen Octavia's mood to a terrible extent, putting more pressure onto her already troubled mind. She weakly drifts away from the doorway and towards the kitchen table, slumping herself down in the chair where her father would usually sit. The frame of the chair felt cold against Octavia's dark feathers, as indifferently cold and hard as the mournful reality which may soon come. Her weary, unfocused eyes glare down at a specific spot in the spotless, posh dining table she now sat behind, the creeping hopelessness of the situation beginning to manifest in her mind like a metaphorical 'Black Dog'. She had remembered at that very moment that awfully fitting descriptor for a heavy burden on one's mind — 'Black Dog' — recollecting to herself that she had heard it in the memoirs from an old Human World historical figure which she couldn't exactly remember the name of. Was it a Roman Poet? A Politician? Octavia didn't quite know, nor did she care to at that point in time.

Entering 'stage left' within Octavia's thoughts with its sudden appearance was the thought of that dirty word within the goetia family — *'Regency'*. The owl princess was an on-and-off bookworm who loved reading and hearing about different types of governance within certain aristocratic systems, especially up in the Human World. One which tend to fascinate her amongst them all was the idea of a 'Regency', which by definition is a position held by a 'Regent' to govern if the head of a Royal House or a ruling Monarch is absent, a minor, or is incapacitated and unfit to perform his or her duties. That was the definition according to the Human World; in Hell, however, such a word was considered disgusting by the Hell royalty's definition. The word 'Regency' in Hell overall meant weakness and vulnerability, in other words an opportunity for outside opposing rival houses to carve and steal certain riches, power, and in some extreme cases, lives, if aforementioned rival houses saw it in their best interests to do so. If a Regency were to happen, Octavia would essentially be a puppet of a new "caretaker" administration which would more likely than not have none of her best interests or wishes in mind. While the owl princess was fascinated by the idea of at least Human World Regencies, she abhorrently feared being the subject of one.

Snapping Octavia out of her pessimistic contemplation was the sound of a polite knock on the kitchen entrance's door frame. A turn of her eyes towards the location of the disturbance revealed that one of the physicians, that being a tall incubus dressed in a long white coat, was now standing idly by in the doorway. Once Octavia's eyes locked onto his, the incubus physician clears his throat politely and says quietly; "Good evening, Miss Octavia."

"What's so 'good' about it?" Octavia sarcastically remarks with more pessimism about her tone, sounding overall deflated by the whole thing which was threatening to unfold.

The incubus solemnly nods with complete understanding to how the owl princess felt, allowing himself through the doorway to slowly approach the kitchen table. He speaks once again; "I was hoping if I could speak to you, just to run some things through about how your father is going so far."

Octavia lightly fidgets her hands with regretful anticipation, her eyes shifting back down towards them before looking back up at the “intruder”; “Is there any good news?”

In spite of the droplet of hope the goetia princess might have had at the time, this too quickly dwindled when the Incubus hesitated to answer. This brief yet prominent hesitation, along with the look of regret which plagued his face like a blemish, told Octavia loud and clear that any form of ‘hope’ was certainly not on the cards in the discussion to come. At once the Incubus Physician sheepishly avoids Octavia’s question, instead saying with almost no emotion; “I do have some notes here which we’ve taken down, listing everything we’ve done to help your father. … We, uh, we just injected him with some—”

“Is he going to live?”

“…Pardon?”

Octavia glares long and deep into the Physician’s eyes, her white pupils almost uncomfortably piercing, though they were full of diminishing hope and bleakness. The look she was giving the complete stranger was like none other she had ever given to anyone else before; it looked as though Octavia felt that her whole life was about to come crashing down all at once, collapsing like the brittle ruins of a stone facade, built by a civilization from long ago.

“You heard me,” Octavia says blankly, continuing to stare long and deep through her hopeless eyes; “My dad, is he going to live?”

Quickly the Physician once more grew nervous and hesitant, much like he had done so with the owl princess’ initial question begging for ‘good news’. It was blatantly obvious to Octavia that this complete stranger was hiding something from her, something which was of utmost importance for her to know.

To Octavia’s heart-aching frustration, the Incubus continued to dither; “W-We, uh, can’t say anything for certain right now, but—”

“Yes you can,” Octavia interrupts once more, her voice beginning to crack with a mixture of frustration and anguish; “Don’t you dare lie to me. Just admit it, you all think dad’s going to die with the way he’s going. That’s why there’s talk of a Regency!”

The Physician was clearly taken aback by Octavia's words, though he still maintained his professional posture; "Miss Octavia, we haven't said anything of that sort to you or to any of your staff."

"Then say it already!" Octavia bellows once again, slamming her fist hard against the dining table with a mighty *"THWACK!"* The Incubus stood in a mildly stunned state as an increasingly frustrated Via demanded once again; "I'll ask you again and you better give me an answer — Will my dad die, yes or no?!"

"We don't know!"

A remarkably short string of words to be sure, but one which was said with such affirmation by the Physician, it managed to snap Octavia out of her state of sudden panic. There was an instantaneous and intensely oppressive silence which filled the kitchen as the two occupants stared at each other with intensity.

Before silence could settle itself in, the Sloth ring Physician spoke once more, elaborating with great professional yet sympathetic emphasis; "I'm sorry, but we just don't know at this stage. But I can tell you that it isn't looking good. I wish I could tell you more than that, but again, we… we just don't know what this disease is."

Uncertainty was the very thing which Octavia was hoping beyond hope to eradicate, yet in spite of her insistence to fully understand her father's chance at survival, that dreadful uncertainty still remained — unwavering and unbroken. Octavia slumps back into her seat with mournful and somber defeat, averting her eyes away from the doctor as she begins to look back down towards the table's surface, a million uncertain thoughts running through her head. An equally defeated sigh left the Physician's lips before approaching the desk, proceeding to present to Octavia what appeared to be a document containing what had to be overtly crucial information. He carefully and politely slides it towards the owl princess who promptly glances towards it, gawking at it with that same look of regret sitting uncompromising in her eyes. Printed upon this document, which was rife with black ink printed words outlining numerous articulate medical and legality-related categories, was a blank space towards the bottom which looked as though it was accommodating for a potential written signature.

With a look of growing forlorn, Octavia shifts her eyes from the paper and back up towards the Physician; "What's this?"

“It’s a form we’d wish for you to sign before we continue with treating your father any further,” the Incubus informs clearly, slightly hesitant with his choice of words.

Immediately suspicions arose within the forefront of Octavia’s mind, causing her to narrow her eyes suspiciously; “W-Why would I need to sign something for treatment, what are you gonna do to him??”

“Because of his condition, we see it necessary that we try a more potent treatment,” the Physician explains in earnest, pressing his outstretched finger towards a specific section of text towards the top of the page, the title of which spelt out a word which Octavia could hardly wrap her head around; “The treatment in question is, in all intents and purposes, ‘experimental’, but we can assure you that it is overall safe. But in order to have it shipped over here along with the equipment it comes with, because of how early in production it’s in, we need the patient’s closest relative to sign this form as consent to use it.”

While the Incubus Doctor thoroughly explains the purpose of signing the document resting upright on the dining table, Octavia cautiously pulls the document towards her, giving it a thorough examination of where she apparently needed to sign. Most of the technical words which Octavia read intently seemed like nothing but a blur to her, though she understood the gist of what it was asking from her — it was asking for her to sign up Stolas, her own father, to a highly experimental and risky treatment which might in the end do nothing to improve his condition, if not worsen it. So much was at stake in this present moment, and Octavia’s conscience told her not to sign it in fear of what might happen. But what alternative was there? What else could she do? It wasn’t as if her critically ailed father was getting any better, and she couldn’t just leave him like that through her own hesitation to sign a bit of paper. After much deliberation, Octavia sighs gravely to herself, hoping beyond seldom much hope that this would end up saving the owl prince’s life — it had to.

Octavia slightly raised her reluctant right hand in the air, proceeding to summon a small, black ballpoint pen in her palm through the means of minimal magic. With a pen now grasped in her right hand, she lowers it down towards the dotted line on the bottom of the document, preparing to author her signature — one which would either save her father’s life, or end it. At the very second Octavia’s ballpoint pen skimmed the surface of the paper, the awful realization of what exactly she was signing on behalf of her incapacitated father hit her all at once, causing the feathers on the back of her neck to stand on edge. At that point Octavia was no longer in control of her own handwriting, her hand and wrist now automatically gliding elegantly across the dotted line, thoroughly authoring a signature while the owlet they were attached to stares at it in a state of disorientated subconsciousness. A deep burning sensation inflicted Octavia’s head like a migraine as she completed the signature, lifting the pen off the page with a shaking hand as she looked down at her name, written in almost perfect cursive writing, the lines of jet-black ink now stained permanently into the space it occupied. The author of the signature stared at it in a state of horrific shock, looking at it as though it was the most repulsive and traumatizing thing in Hell — it was like she had just signed a death warrant, at least according to her mind which was plagued with plentiful doubts and anxieties. Octavia’s tolerance for seeing her very own signature on the page quickly

waned, shakily tossing it back towards the Physician in clear physical disgust with the horrendous thing.

In quiet respect for Octavia's less-than-desirable position, the Incubus picks up the document and slides it back into a pocket within his white coat. At once he says; "We'll have it all here within the next twelve hours or less, I can assure you."

"Right…" Octavia says, her voice reduced to a depressive, croaky whisper as she spoke; "…This better wo—"

"Miss Octavia?"

Abruptly cutting off the owl princess was another voice once again coming from the kitchen's entrance doorway. Both Octavia and the present Physician pivot their heads in tandem, finding a nurse, this time an imp, standing with her arms politely and formally to their sides.

With the owlet's attention now firmly fixated on her, the nurse states her reason for interruption; "Your father wishes to see you."

Somewhere, off in a far distant land, a dark wind blows…

"Welcome to Kilgowie" — Those were the simple words written in clear bold letters on the rectangular-shaped weather beaten sign, signifying that beyond it was the township it so earnestly advertised. This too was the sign which Loona's eyes locked onto for a few seconds as the car she sat within passed it at a cruising pace. Above her head, outside in the cold and brisk open air, rolled the sound of distant thunder for the umpteenth time as the sky had grown, and continued to grow, progressively darker since leaving the summit camping spot. It turns out that the fabled township of 'Kilgowie' was rather diminutive compared to Morrisvale, only consisting of a handful of spaced out, single-storey hardwood timber buildings on either side of the road which the black four-wheel-drive drove upon, two of which were adjoining decades-old buildings which hosted what appeared to be a bakery and a general store respectively. In short, Kilgowie was, for all intents and purposes, a very stereotypical small Australian country town, nestled in the middle of vast rolling hills and open fields, peppered with large and scattered accumulations of dense woodland.

Speaking of the scattered accumulation of coolabah and eucalyptus trees alike, the apparent driver of conversation on the home stretch towards the “hive” was how the bushland seemed to whisper. Of course, the rugged, sun-punished terrain of Queensland, Australia didn’t whisper in the way a person would, but rather how beneath the trees out there, there was more than likely untold stories which the dead could only tell, their sun-bleached bones lying underneath the vast leaf canopies. It was a conversation starter which Jim decided to initiate ten minutes earlier, and was one which Loona ended up thinking long and curiously about — perhaps too long, as the disguised hellhound unknowingly found herself in an isolated and thoughtful world of her own. In fact, Loona couldn’t help but think that perhaps what would happen between her and Malloy in no time at all would be one of those mysterious hidden stories the “Whispering Bush” would keep, locked away amidst all the bleaching bones and ancient, towering trunks and their spindly branches.

Without warning, Loona is forcefully snapped out of her dazing pensiveness when she is hit with a question, this time from Jim; “So what do you think of that?”

Loona turns her head to the left where Jim sat on the adjacent passenger seat, looking towards her. Almost by instinct the momentarily attentive undercover hellhound knew what the human beside her was referring to, replying as such; “It’s, uh… definitely something to think about, that’s for sure. I-I don’t know, it kind of freaks me out.”

“Yeah, for sure,” Jim agrees with the sentiment with casual respect paid towards it, Loona watching as the young man turns his head to pensively gaze back outside, much like how she was mere seconds prior.

A low and guttural groan of pensiveness sounds off from the driver’s seat directly in front of Loona, alerting her to the fact that an otherwise reserved and quiet Vasily was just about to shatter his silence and contribute with his own input; “I’ve heard things like that. It’s strange to think about — how many bones and unmarked burials we could be walking over or by without any of us knowing. … If only the Earth could speak, we’d hear all about it.”

“Do you believe in ghosts, Vasily?” Jim asks with genuine interest, prompting Loona to give him a look which questions him on where this was going.

Vasily didn’t answer right away, deciding to ponder his definitive answer with more thought. Eventually, after finally leaving the township of Kilgowie behind in the northbound direction towards Toowoomba, as indicated by the roadside distance sign, the deeply pensive Russian finally delivers his verdict on the matter; “Depends on what you mean by “ghosts”. If you are referring to the idea that any and all “ghosts” are truly the souls of the dead unable to rest, then I am not so certain. … But if by “ghosts”, you mean the result of hallucinations brought about by mental

torment or them being the forms of deceptive demons, then I am more inclined to believe that, and even more so respectively."

"I've heard that before you know," Jim acknowledges shortly after Vasily finishes telling of his insight; "As in the idea that ghosts are actually demons and such. It scares me shitless to think about."

Loona stares sternly directly at Jim with firmly fixated eyes, the look of which she gave told him very emphatically, but at the same time in a beginning manner, to 'quit it' — there was nothing more she feared at that moment, and at any rate, than the deeply religious, broad-shouldered driver finding out that he was sharing his car with a cleverly disguised hellhound.

"Oh, I'm sure they are around us…" Vasily slurs underneath his growingly rash and hushed voice, the growl which emanates with each syllable equating to the bellow of a highly territorial crocodile. An awful chill ran up Loona's spine in direct reaction to Vasily's delivery, almost certain that his statement was not in fact a broad assumption, instead a heavily implied and confident insinuation. The sooner Loona could get out of the car and away from Vasily's relentless suspicions, the better.

As the car made headway along the continuous two-lane country road and across a bridge spanning across a particularly deep gully, barely noticeable raindrops began to lightly pepper the windscreen. The darkening overcast clouds which had been threatening to rain had finally begun to open up, the diminutive specks of raindrops growing more frequent and larger, and the light mist of falling rain veiled the two-lane highway, the road of which was now beginning to ascend slightly uphill. Then came the sound of thunder, the ominous rumbling roar of which sent a faint shockwave through the car, meaning the brunt of the storm was now just above Loona's head. Soon as the rain begins to obscure the windscreen with a blinding veil of raindrops, Vasily flicks on the wipers, allowing them to periodically swipe across the length of the windscreen in long, arching strokes, accompanied by a soft mechanical whirring sound everytime they swipe.

Loona looks up through the window at the falling rain with disgruntled inconvenience, muttering to herself with simmering frustration; "Great, just great. Exactly what we fucking needed right now. What next, huh? Anything else want to fuck this up further??"

"Least it's not hail," Jim dully interjects, his head once again turned towards Loona after having been staring aimlessly out of his own respective window.

Loona turns her head back towards Jim's direction with another one of her "stern warning" looks, quietly begging; "Jim, I am begging you, don't you dare jinx it."

“Nothing is getting “jinxed”, there’s not such a thing,” Vasily dryly assures from the driver’s seat, obviously having heard Loona’s deepest concerns in spite of her attempts to harshly whisper. Apparently the liberty of private conversation was effectively nonexistent throughout this entire car ride, and will continue to be so until it ended.

Another rumbling bellow of thunder roars high above Loona’s head outside, this time with significantly more bass and tremor than the last round, making its colossal size and ferocity known to the disguised hellhound who heard and felt it. From her previous trips up to the Human World, Loona found that nature had a certain way of sounding and feeling, provoking certain emotions and actions depending on the mood at the time. If Loona had found herself in better times, she would be inclined to enjoy the weather as-is, no matter how much it poured or bellowed with vibrating thunder — she usually liked weather like this, one which she would consider perfect ‘sleeping’ weather any other day. However in this instance, there was something rather unnervingly abnormal about the sudden hail of rain and thunder Loona was now amidst, as if it was a sentient, cleverly disguised beast which took the form of otherwise unsuspecting weather, heralding woefully of tough times ahead.

If it wasn’t for the sudden realization that a precise ‘plan’ hadn’t been formalized, Loona would’ve most likely drifted off into a state of daydream. As a matter of fact, thanks to this realization, the disguised hellhound felt more than inclined to ask; “Wait, so, does everyone know what we’re doing once we get there? Like what’s the plan here?”

Vasily acknowledges Loona’s question with a dull singular-noted grunt, continuing to glare straight ahead at the road now cutting through a patch of thick tree coverage; “I thought this whole thing was your idea. Whatever your plan is, I’ll follow, I only agreed to act as support.”

“Wow, thanks for the help…” Loona sarcastically remarks in kind just under the wisp of her breath, then in an instant switching her focus on the ‘game plan’; “Uh… I-I suppose we scout the area out first, see what’s there and what it all looks like… Then— uh… then, yeah, we go from there. There’s a huge building we got to find, it’s supposed to be next to a river or something like that.”

“…You sound uncertain,” the coldly analytical Russian points out without a hint of regret of saying so, obviously taking note of the widely impromptu nature of Loona’s ‘plan’.

Loona stutters after being left speechless by this, albeit true, judgmental assessment, trying to find words to defend herself but to no avail. Knowing full well that becoming aggressively defensive wouldn’t serve her well, Loona decided to cave in; “Of course I am. Frankly, I’m terrified for my life! But wouldn’t you be, too?”

It seemed as though this somewhat unexpected self-admission of weakness from Loona managed to take Vasily aback, appearing to momentarily abstain from answering the rhetorical question that had just been put upon his coat-draped shoulders. For as long as Vasily hesitates from thinking, Loona stays completely quiet in anticipation for what might be said next, blunt or otherwise. Eventually the stiff, seemingly relentless quiet ceases when the middle-aged man finally states; "You say that as if I'm not uncertain myself. I didn't mean any judgment by it, I just noticed that you seemed it."

Loona nods rigidly in affirmation to her confession just seconds prior, though still mildly reluctant to fully admit that she was, indeed, morbidly anxious for what was to come, the anticipation almost too much to bear. She expresses in all seriousness; "I-I mean, I am. I swear I'm telling you the truth! Neither of us in this car know how this "thing" is going to turn out, and that… that scares me. … Thanks for understanding, though, I appreciate it."

Vasily seemed to dismiss Loona's expression of gratitude with a sweeping gesture of his hand, signaling to the disguised hellhound that her 'thanks' weren't necessary. Suddenly the driver begins to slow the cruising vehicle down to a much slower speed, just as it crests a sharp left turn. This was for good reason as well, as Loona could see just at the end of the corner, off to the left-hand side, was the beginning of a dirt road leading right into the thicket of what was particularly thick woodland, at last marking the end of the rolling, wide-open fields which Loona had grown accustomed to.

"Alright, here it is!" Vasily announces with a raised tempo to his imposing voice; "From what I've heard about this place, it's a fair fifteen minutes away from the main road here. Once we're in here, we're in here. Any help we need won't come quickly — I'm warning you both from now."

"It's either now or never…" Loona mutters under the shallowness of an apprehensive sigh, feeling her body begin to sway as the four-wheel-drive's thick tyres meet the unkempt and rough surface of the dirt track.

As the jet-black car rolled further along the track and right into the seemingly endless thicket of plentiful ancient trees, the perpetually falling rain seemed to dissipate slightly into a bearable stream, the raindrops becoming lighter and less blinding than they had been before. In addition, Loona alertly watches the area around them seemed to grow darker as they advance ever deeper into the midst of this vast, unforgiving forest. Of course, this was most likely due to the abundant shadows created by the vast, neverending swathes of branches covered in thick leaves, causing the ground underneath to be denied much light. It was as if this emerging oppressive darkness was a great formless beast, feasting off the gloomy light casted from the vastly overcast sky. Nevertheless, something told Loona that this wasn't the case — Loona couldn't help but think that this wasn't any ordinary darkness, but instead a darkness which seemed "otherworldly", or "out of

place” with the space around them. Something was ‘wrong’ with the darkness they were now amidst, causing Loona to become very cautious of it.

The disguised hellhound’s suspicions of this otherworldly darkness seemed to be supported by the look on Jim’s face — a look of mild but growing confusion as he, too, grew aware of the unusual nature of this translucent, shadowy veil of black. The young man turns his head to Loona who was staring right back at him, prompting him to gesture his finger outside at the seemingly unnatural darkness, effectively asking her if she was noticing it too. Loona, of course, confirms that she was with a brief but firmly aware nod, a shiver of unease running up her spine before switching her eyes back towards the road ahead, looking over Vasily’s broad shoulder. Lo and behold, the road ahead was also covered by even more of that foreboding and otherworldly darkness, causing Loona to feel increasingly alarmed about its colossally unnerving presence. Adding only to her fears was Vasily’s own reaction, the thus-far reserved and uncompromising Russian muttering under his breath something in his native Cyrillic language. Though she couldn’t entirely understand what he had said, Loona instinctively knew just by the circumstances they found themselves in that he was taking note of the ‘wrongness’ lingering in the air, in a voice which certainly didn’t inspire any confidence.

As Loona stares intently at the quite literal dark road ahead, she ponders out loud to herself with a wandering tone to her voice; “This seems to be going for a while…”

“Mm…” Jim hums monotonically in agreement, his own face wearing the same look of quiet, cautious observation which Loona wore like a permanent fixture; “What’s with this darkness, too. It’s not even mid-afternoon yet, I don’t think.”

Loona momentarily shifts her eyes back towards Jim, attempting to find an answer for the apparent out-of-the-ordinary phenomena; “You sure it isn’t just the trees blocking out the light, or…?”

“No, it can’t be. It looks too dark to be shadows or something like that,” Jim mutters while slowly shaking his head in consideration, his eyes firmly fixated on the branch-veiled dirt track which kept advancing further into the trees for what seemed like miles on end; “...It looks like a kind of “dark mist”, doesn’t it? It's like smoke.”

Another look back outside through the window to her right proved to Loona that, concerningly enough, that Jim’s assessment was correct. Upon paying the most awful darkness a more thorough look, Loona realized to her dismay that this ‘shadow’ was in fact not a shadow, or a darkness — It was a type of almost otherworldly fog, swirling around the trunks of the spindly and towering gum trees like a serpent which was without a solid physical form. It was aimless in its direction, and so faint and transparent that if Loona were to blink, she would completely miss the apparent

movement which was happening all around her. Truly, something was wrong — so incredibly wrong.

With a light exhale to keep her nerves at relative ease, Loona steers her head away from the window, deciding to divert her attention to the depths of her phone, promptly pulling the device from her jacket's pocket and turning it on. Before Loona could unlock her phone proper, she noticed yet another strange phenomena, only adding to the quickly growing list of unusual happenings — The time on her phone had vanished, and in place of the coherent digits was a mess of numbers overlayed on top of each other. To top it all off, there was no internet connection; not even a single, measly bar.

"O Bozhe, ty shutish'!"

Loona jerks her head back up to glare towards Vasily in the driver's seat, asking almost immediately; "Everything okay?"

Vasily growls frustratedly to himself, shaking his head from side to side in conjunction before sighing harshly; "No, nothing is okay! Look ahead!"

Loona does so, shifting her attention to the pathway ahead, in turn quickly feeling the same frustrated disbelief which Vasily was feeling. Lying width-wise across the road ahead was a large and rotting fell trunk, guarding the road beyond it like a steadfast guardsman made of sturdy yet deteriorating wood. One thing was for certain with this sudden development of further unfavorable circumstances; if they wished to progress any further, they would need to somehow shift this roadblock… in the rain, in the midst of the mysterious dark fog. Loona abhorred the idea, but what other choice did they have? At least the rain seemed to be subsiding, at least for now…

Without a word said, all three passengers — driver and all — got out of the car, Vasily being the quickest on his feet as he stood over the large obstructive trunk. Even compared to the Russian's sturdily broad build draped in his beige coat now wet with the drizzle of rain, the sizable trunk with its flaking dirty-white bark was truly formidable in its growth, having to be at least four feet in width. Loona slammed her door shut as she stepped out into the misty haze of now light rain, the cautious unease she was feeling only heightened as she noticed the dark fog still lingering all around them, showing no signs of dissipating anytime soon. With her hands tucked deep into her jacket's lower pockets, Loona approaches Vasily who is alerted by the sound of her footsteps against the wet dirt and rocks. He turns around to face Loona, immediately beginning to "shoo" her away with a pointed crooked finger back towards his vehicle.

The Russian orders earnestly with a word of authority; “You, I’ll get you to stand on guard. Get your rifle from the back and keep a lookout. You see anything “interesting” approaching us, you shoot it.”

“Got it,” Loona complies with the obligation to do so, spinning herself around and heading straight towards the back of the black four-wheel-drive. Her eyes were practically unblinking and piercing through the cover of trunks like a hawk as she reached the back of the car, wasting no time in grabbing her ‘Gewehr 98’ rifle and sliding a clip of six rounds into the magazine. That’s when Loona realized something, perhaps a last-minute consideration, instantly reaching into her right pocket and pulling out that “thing” — the blessed bullet. She stares intently at it with almost transfixed eyes, watching as the light mist of rain slides down the brass casing, the almost hypnotizing lightly glowing blessed markings glinting with an almost profound grace. As Loona stares down at it with consideration, she asks herself; “Should I load it in now?” … Ultimately, she decided against it, somehow knowing that she would need it later, in the fullness of time. Loona carefully slides the bullet back from where it came before slamming the back door shut, resting her rifle in her hands and linking back up with Jim and Vasily at the front, finding them in the midst of deciding the right way to shift the obstructive trunk.

“There’s no way we’re gonna move this all in one piece,” Jim informs Vasily with his left leg propped up against the fallen trunk; “I reckon what we do is we… you know, cut it up… or at least weaken it so we can break it into smaller bits.”

“And how long will that take us?” Vasily asks ponderously, pressing his hand against the bark to find that, thankfully, the trunk had grown very brittle.

Jim shrugs; “Uh… probably about fifteen minutes, half an hour at most. You got an ax?”

“A small one, it’s in the glove box,” Vasily informs, promptly making his way back to the car to retrieve the ax, barely noticing Loona who was now looking all around with her rifle at the ready.

The air was cold and unforgiving against Loona’s fair skin, even with the jacket keeping her relatively protected against the elements. She noticed everything; the profound lack of wind, the stillness of the branches, and especially the faintly swirling dark mist which refused to give way to more natural light, lingering around like the thick smoke of a wildfire.

Momentarily diverting her attention away from the surroundings, though not by much, was Jim calling out to her, asking; “Everything okay with you?”

Loona shrugs; “I guess. Just keeping watch.”

“Ah well, good on ya,” Jim passively says as he wanders on over to stand beside Loona for a moment, looking out into the wilderness along with her; “...Fuck, it’s quiet out here.”

“Sure. I hope it remains that way,” Loona solemnly wishes. Without moving her head, she glanced towards Jim and acknowledged his flat cap now perched atop his head. She snickers weakly; “That hat still looks stupid.”

“Yeah, maybe. It keeps my head warm though,” Jim grins faintly in return, clasping his hands behind his back and briefly rocking on his heels.

Suddenly Vasily, who had now since returned to the trunk with the small ax now grasped in his hands, calls towards Jim; “Mister Steele! Come help me with this!”

“Alright, coming!” Jim calls out in return, nodding quietly towards Loona before marching back towards the rotting trunk, now ready to get to work clearing the way.

At once, Loona was once again left in the quiet again; just the way she liked it, considering the circumstances. The silence felt weirdly calming to Loona, as if it provided much needed solace and tranquility, even if it was temporary which she knew full well it was. The question now was exactly how long this momentary spell of solace would last, and how it would be broken. Truly, Loona didn’t want to think about it, instead deciding that she would take it in her stride with as much stoicism as she could muster — something which was far easier said than done.

…

That’s when a sound came. Loona’s eyes shoot off to the right, deeper into the bushland where the thick black fog lingered most. It was an incredibly faint sound, one which the disguised hellhound barely heard. She stares hyper-fixated into the direction of where she thought she heard it, trying to make it out… but alas, she didn’t hear anything. Just the faint, dead wind blowing weakly through the plentiful trees, rustling the leaves with the misty rain it carried. Loona diverts her gaze away from the area and back to where she initially was staring, chalking the noise up to her imagination… but she heard it again, prompting her to snap her head back in the direction from whence it came, her eyes widening with emerging fear. It was louder this time, though still faint,

barely being carried with the little wind there was. Loona began to realize then and there that there was something familiar about the noise… then she heard it a third time, her mouth falling slightly agape with quick realization.

It was the sound of screaming. But not just any scream; it was a cry for help.

"It burns!!" The voice screams again, still faint in volume but discernable enough for Loona's exceptionable hearing; *"It fucking burns!! Loonie!! Loonie please, help me!!"*

It was Blitz. He was calling from the fog. He was screaming in pain. It was Blitz. It was Blitz, calling for her.

It was Blitz, it had to be!

"Loona?! Loona!!" Jim's voice calls out from behind Loona as she runs deeper into the bushland in a state of what had to be intense hypnotism, directly into the direction of the dark fog.

But Loona couldn't hear. All the sounds around her were muffled as she ran further and further into the fog, her mind obstructed with a fog of its own as she ran wide-eyed towards the fog, her rifle drawn.

"LOONA, GET BACK HERE!!"

Deeper and deeper, into the fog, her vision getting obscured with it all, effectively blinding her.

Darker, darker, and ever darker, until Loona could see nothing at all, all the while Blitz called out for her — to save him. And then, pitch blackness.

A dark wind blows.

???? Hours Until The Ritual.

Pandemonium - II

It came like a rolling and roaring thunder, the sound of uncontained laughter; it was the unmistakable bellowing of sickeningly blissful schadenfreude.

Blitz had allowed himself to devolve into a sudden outburst of defiant and mean-spirited laughter, feeling particularly joyful over the words which he had read on his phone. The imp had at last discovered the news:

"GONE INTO HIDING? Verosika Steps Up Security After Violent Sinner Encounter, Announces Cancellation of Shows "Until Further Notice"!"

"HAH— NO FUCKING WAY!! OH-HOHO, oh MAN!! Christ on a stick, that's fucking hilarious!"

Since discovering the news for himself, Blitz had been grinning to himself a relentless and purely evil grin, far wider than he had ever done so before, all the while hissing and cackling through his teeth in persistent bursts. It felt as though he was like a child again on his birthday, giving out a toothy grin knowing that he would be spoiled rotten with all sorts of gifts and food, all of which would be filled with nauseating amounts of sugar and starch. In all honesty with himself in this time of great "triumph" over his Ex, Blitz saw this development as an absolute and unquestionable win, for whatever reason — a reason which even he didn't know. Regardless, however, Blitz didn't care to discover the reason which he had quickly said "fuck it" towards; his "rival" had been conquered, at least for now, and schadenfreude had filled his veins with a pleasant warmth.

"FUCK YEAH!! Eat shit, you pink bimbo!!" Blitz screams on top of his lungs with a booming guffaw, his disgustingly wide grin never faltering; "You can take your piece-of-shit spunk stain career, and shove it WAY UP YOUR LITTLE PINK HOLE!!"

"Oh for fuck sake— WILL YOU SHUT UP IN THERE?!" As to be expected with the imp's rambunctious and haughty celebration, he had managed to anger his neighbors for what had to be the umpteenth time since he had moved into the apartment.

Blitz, of course, responded accordingly, calling out to the unfortunate neighbor somewhere outside in the hallway; "SIT ON A DICK, CUMSTAIN, I'M CELEBRATING! What have you got to celebrate, huh?! … Exactly! NOTHING!!"

There was no reply to Blitz's arrogant comment of misplaced superiority, wait as he might, the outsider obviously wanting to avoid further confrontation. Regardless of the reason as to why the heckler had fallen silent, the imp who was still on his overzealous high made one last remark; "Yeah, that's what I thought!"

Before Blitz could heave himself off the couch he sat upon and waltz his way into the kitchen, the deep blue hardcover engraved with etchings made of gold of the grimoire resting directly beside him caught his eye. This was enough to convince the lone imp to cease his terrible arrogant grinning, the grin quickly vanishing into a slack jawed gape. Blitz stares at the grimoire's cover intently, the responsibility of which he had promised Loona he would adhere to finally coming back to him — he was to protect it, and was to use it with urgency if need be. For the agreed emergency plan to work, Blitz would need to focus; as of the past fifteen minutes which he had spent gloating to himself, he hadn't been doing much of that at all.

Sobriety hastily replaced the blissful and intoxicating feelings of schadenfreude in Blitz's mind as he remembered his task, the imp stifling himself while quickly quietening, abstaining from any further "celebration". The solitary individual all alone in his now completely dead silent apartment picked up the grimoire and nestled it under his arm, bringing it along with him into the kitchen; Blitz was thirsty, and his appetite demanded something to keep himself mildly entertained, but something minimal so as to stay alert. The sound of Blitz's black boots clacked along the floor as he strolls into the kitchen, making a beeline towards the fridge where he knew the answer to his thirst would lie within. The growingly, though still faintly parched imp outstretched his free hand up to the fridge's door handle, swinging the metallic door open with a soft yet assertive yank. At once, Blitz was welcomed to the display of a half-empty fridge, the blast of freezing cold temperatures produced by the kitchen appliance hitting his face instantly, welcoming him with open arms like he was an old visitor — but barely a friend.

At once, Blitz began to scour the fridge for something light to indulge himself in, and sure enough, staring right back at the thirsty imp was the solution. Gently clinking and rattling on the bottom shelf of the fridge door from the sudden inertia was a small collection of bottles of cheap liquor — the type which had barely an ounce of alcohol within it, and could in all honesty be described as a "Light Cider", instead of anything much harder, such as the likes of whiskey or rum — bastardized even, compared to its far stronger counterparts. Blitz's eyes lit up with a glint from his parched appetite as he grabbed the neck of one of the bottles, the dark brown glass icy cold against his naked fingers as he shoved the fridge door shut. Spare the responsibility that he bestowed upon himself on behalf of his daughter, Blitz hadn't a care in the world as he used the countertop beside the fridge as a makeshift bottle opener, the delicately faint sound of carbonation filling the air as the bottle cap popped right off with a soft clatter as it fell to the floor. With the bottle now wide open and contents ready for greedy consumption, Blitz took a hefty swig, the base of the brown glass container tipped up to the sky as he drank; one… two… three… four. Like a fish out of water, Blitz gasped greedily for air as he swallowed his mouthful of cheap liquor, savoring the bitter taste as it washed down his throat, like the flow of nature's God-given water down a descending creek, as painfully ironic of a description that may sound.

Blitz shuddered from his body processing the cheap booze as he stared at the label; “Nnn–ngah! Argh… E-E-Errrgh! Oh Hell, that tastes like horseshit…”

The now mildly disgusted albeit newly nourished Blitz squints coldly at the bottle, holding it up by the tip of the neck to the above kitchen light and softly swirling it around, the contents sloshing around inside and softly illuminating from the light source above. For a few extra seconds than what could be considered as ‘necessary’, Blitz continued to stare at the concoction as it twists and ripples in the glass from the inertia, glaring at it with purely mindless analysis, most likely due to the growing sense of relative boredom he was now beginning to feel. Before he could get too entranced with the bland bottle of booze, Blitz began to wonder about Loona’s exact whereabouts and well-being with serious consideration, wondering whether or not she was ‘okay’. It had roughly been a day or so since Loona had left, and thus far there hadn’t been any contact between them; a fact which was starting to get to Blitz, causing a hint of worry. Regardless of the worry, Blitz shook his head to dismiss it; Loona was fine! As she had said before she left; if she needed help, she would’ve called him by now! No news is good news, right? … Right?

A cold chill gently swept through the air as the growingly anxious imp rationalized with himself. Blitz shivered as this apparent “breeze” of icy cold air flowed through him, looking back up from his unfocused daze and towards the fridge, ready to close it — but the fridge was already closed.

“Huh..?”

Blitz glares with mild confusion at the firmly closed fridge, at once trying to figure out where the sudden gust of chill had come from. However, almost instantly, Blitz realized something — he could still feel the chill. It wasn’t as if it was a gust or a brief isolated instance where something cold had blown through, or that there was a continuous draft, it was more so that the air around him had suddenly changed dramatically in temperature. In fact, the whole apartment had suddenly grown cold.

Something wasn’t ri—

“You look cold, dearest.”

Blitz jumps in fright as the voice spoke, whirling himself around and pulling out a pistol from within his coat, aiming it directly at where the intruder stood! He barks with his row of sharp, snarling teeth; “HANDS WHERE I CAN SEE THEM, MOTHERF—…”

As instantly as he had postured himself ready to fight, Blitz fell into a frozen state of absolute disbelief. His snarl quickly faded and his eyes widened from being narrowed with fury, meeting with the ‘intruder’ — a female imp, much like himself, and one which he recognized all too well.

“…M-Mom..?”

Sure enough, as sure as the sun is hot and as clear as day, standing before Blitz with her hands clasped politely together was his mother. It was her. It was her alright, looking exactly as Blitz had remembered her, in all of her warm and loving presence; as exactly how she was before the fire. From the very second her son laid his disbelieving wide eyes upon her, he knew for a fact that this was no delusion or hallucination, no trick of the mind — she was standing right there, her messed yet elegant long black hair reflecting under the overhead light, and her long purple dress illuminated along with it. It was Tilla alright, it was her, and she looked whole and healthy. The only thing that was missing was her red skull broach; the one Blitz now wore for the longest time in her memory.

A deeply rooted feeling of poignancy was quick to overwhelm Blitz as he stood there motionlessly, the bottle he held threatening to slip from his grasp by barely an inch, and his jaw slack with saddened bewilderment. Tears began to well up in his eyes as he croaked once more; “M-Mom? … M-Momma, is that—... i-is-that-you?”

Conjuring only more tears for Blitz was the soft, assuring smile that Tilla gave him, along with a soft nod of her head. She offers her ever-so-soft words of assurance; “It is. It’s me. I’m here for you, Blitzo. I’ve come to see you.”

“B-But—... No, no this isn’t right,” Blitz stammered and hesitated through harshly bated breath, his eyes unfocused yet fixated on his mother’s presence; “This is horseshit, this isn’t you! You died! I-I saw the tent burn!”

Tilla’s eyes grew poignant and sorrowful with her son’s words, his staunch verdict on her fate seeming to hurt her, only being made more apparent with her cooing; “Oh, my sweet boy. My poor, sweetest boy, I know. I’m so sorry I haven’t seen you earlier, I regret that so, so much.”

Blitz’s eyes widened with horrid surprise through his misty vision, refocusing on his mother before stuttering; “No. Nonono, momma, please, don’t be sorry! Y-You shouldn’t feel sorry at all! I… I-

I'm just… holy shit, momma, you're here. … You're right here, a-and that's all that matters now! I-I'm so sorry about… a-about everything…"

Tilla softly nods once again, not once moving from her spot underneath the light, making sure that her dearest son could see her in full view; "Oh, Blitzo. Understand that you've got nothing to feel guilty for, either. I forgave you a long, long time ago. You're still my boy, and nothing will change that."

"But I hurt you! I-I hurt Fizz, I hurt Barbie… a-and I hurt you," Blitz croaked mournfully, standing there like a child as he threatened to break into a tearful sob, his lips quivering through the earthquake his emotions were duly giving to him.

Tilla let out a very faint and maternal sigh, watching Blitz begin to sob more and more, at last gently approaching her son with an elegant "float" in her step. Blitz stares wide-eyed at his now approaching mother and dared not to move as she comes close, stifling his sobs and hiccups when he then feels his mother's touch against his cheek, her fingers wiping away the tears which had streaked down his face like horrible wet vines. Her touch; it felt so, so comfortingly warm; a warmth which Blitz had yearned for, for so long, and a warmth which only a mother could possess.

The motherly imp's eyes held no malice within them as she stared into her son's own, before then shifting her focus to the bottle grasped in his hands. That's when her smile slightly fades in maternal concern, before asking; "What is that in your hand, dearest?"

Blitz glances down at the bottle before trying to hide it, for the first time in a long while feeling ashamed. He tried hiding the liquor away from his mother as though he was a child again who knew he had done something very wrong. With a shy stutter, Blitz confesses; "It's, uh… it's beer, mom. Look, i-it's not the strong stuff, I promise!"

Tilla made a light frown, looking with worry into her son's eyes once more; "Blitz, my darling boy… What have I told you about avoiding alcohol? I sure hope you're not attached to the stuff, you do know how horribly addictive it is."

Indeed Blitz did know how addictive any type of liquor could be, and unfortunately he knew this firsthand. On many a night, he had fallen victim to the end of a bottle of the "devil's water" time and time again, more often than not to drown out his multitude of sorrows and regrets which bellowed in his mind with such tremendous volume, especially if they got too loud to bear. Blitz had fallen to the "comfort" of hard liquor so many times, that he, at this point, begrudgingly accepted it as essentially being a 'part' of him; the same way a convict would consider his cold and

unforgiving prison cell as his home. Tears began to well up in Blitz's eyes once more as he stared guiltily at his dearest mother, finding no courage to admit to his terrible sin, instead submissively nodding with disgraced meekness. How could he admit such a horrible thing to his own mother? How could he bring himself to?

Instead of reacting with bitter disappointment, as Blitz was anticipating, Tilla gave another soft and reassuring smile as she gently held her son's shoulder. She coos softly; "Why don't we go sit down, Blitzo? We must catch up."

"O-Okay…" Blitz meekly obliged, his tone soft and dulled in the same way a child would. With his mother's reassuringly warm hand still gently grabbed onto his left shoulder, Blitz leads her back to the couch with a slow step, offering his mother to sit down first — an offer which she took with gratefulness and a comment on how her son was 'such a gentleman' — an opinion which Blitz quietly disagreed with. Blitz's body felt woefully heavy as he fell backwards into the couch directly beside his mother, his courage to look her in the eye next to none. Though he avoided eye contact, Blitz knew that his mother was still looking at him with that same motherly look of love she had arrived with, the feeling of which felt melancholic yet comforting.

After a short while of sitting in silence, Tilla once more broke it with her soothing voice; "You have such a lovely little apartment. How long have you lived here?"

"A-About five years, I guess," Blitz informs with uncertainty; "I wouldn't call it 'lovely' either, more depressing."

Tilla nods calmly, proceeding to examine the apartment from the comfort of the couch; "Very well. And you still love your horses, I see?"

"Heh, yeah… I never gave it up," Blitz answered solemnly with a crooked smile of sentimentality, briefly holding the palm of his now free hands up to his head as he started to feel the effects of a creeping headache. The grimoire now sat within Blitz's lap, and atop of it was his 'cheap-as-piss' barely alcoholic drink, intending to consume it later when his mother's caring eyes were no longer watching — a 'guilty pleasure', in all instances of the description. The still bewildered imp shivers as he once again notices the inexplicable chill lingering throughout his apartment, never seeming to disperse as though a relentless draft was blowing throughout it from some unknown source. But that didn't matter much to him; the warmth of his mother's mere presence was enough to protect him against it. So as to avoid sitting in silence like a frightened lamb, Blitz forced himself to work up the courage and ask his mother; "So where have you been?"

“Hiding, I suppose,” Tilla says in a solemn yet still soothing voice; “Waiting for the right time to come see you.”

Blitz grew mildly confused; “‘T-The right time?’”

“Unfortunately, yes. I’ve had to wait so long to come and see you,” Tilla reflects with a more somber tone, with Blitz noticing that her tone of voice no longer had that ‘cooing’ which comforted him through the minutes which had gone by. In fact, Blitz couldn’t help but notice that his dearest mother sounded more… ‘serious’. Tilla stares blankly ahead at an indeterminate spot at the wall in front of them as she speaks further; “Sometimes there’s… certain ‘things’ which are completely out of our control, and sometimes… we need to stay out of them.”

Blitz grew even more puzzled; “What? … Momma, what does that—”

“You have a daughter now, do you not?” Tilla interrupted in that same dull tone, though her comforting tone had suddenly returned. She sounded calm and unrushed, and didn’t seem to notice that her son was just about to inquire about the intentions of her very brief monologue.

“I… I-I do!” Blitz asks with a momentary hesitation, still lingering on his mother’s earlier strange words which she seemed to dismiss hastily; “How did you know, who told you?”

Tilla softly smiled as she looked back into her son’s eyes; “Haven’t you heard? It’s ‘the talk of the town’ — Blitzo Buckzo and his ‘Immediate Murder Professionals’. It’s a… strange career path, dearest, but nevertheless I support you. A select few people have told me about your daughter, too; about… how she treats you.”

Blitz squirms in his seat as he feels the urge to ready himself to defend his daughter. He squints and asks; “Which people? I swear, momma, if they’ve been telling lies about my goddamn daughter, I will—”

“Are they lies, dearie? Are they really?” Tilla seemed to ask this not as a genuine question, but rhetorically. It seemed so strange to Blitz to hear his caring and soft-spoken mother speak in such a way, especially about someone who he so wholeheartedly cared about.

Something was up, and Blitz was beginning to sense it. Now the urge to defend his daughter was beyond containing, looking deeply yet respectfully into his mother's eyes and asserting with mild yet notable force; "Momma, please listen. I don't know 'who' has said 'what' about my daughter, but whatever they've been saying are lies. Loonie is a good girl, I know she is! She just has… h-has some trouble connecting with me."

Blitz awaited his mother's response as he looked deeply into her eyes — a response which never came. Tilla froze in place as she stared motionlessly at her son, her smile which she maintained seeming more and more unsettling as the seconds of silence ticked by. Thankfully the loud silence and stillness didn't last much longer as the maternal imp made her move, sighing briefly through her nostrils and extending her hands out towards her son's own, squeezing her fingers twice to tell him to hold her hand. Usually Blitz would've accepted the offer without hesitancy, wanting to be reminded of his mother's caring touch once more after years of being alone, afraid, and above all, full of guilt and the weight of his own heinous betrayals of himself — but there was something about her hand which made him think twice. While, yes, it was definitely his mother's hand, there was nevertheless something so alien about it, as if it were something to be cautious of. A phrase which began to sound off within Blitz's head, like the flicker of a rising flame about to evolve into a scorching inferno, described it all-too well; 'Too good to be true'.

"Come on, dearest," Tilla beckons kindly once more, her voice soothing in a way that Blitz hadn't heard from anyone else before or since her death; "Hold my hand for me."

Deliberation and hesitancy plagued Blitz for a few seconds as he stared into his mother's eyes, before at last letting out a short, harsh breath of air. At last, he reaches his hand out towards Tilla's own opened palm, their touch meeting as the female imp's delicate fingers softly close around her son's hand. Blitz manages to let out a smile, albeit slightly forced in its nature as he began to have second thoughts, on top of a subconscious part of him telling him with a frantic urgency that he was somehow being hypnotized; it was as if his body could sense it, but not Blitz himself.

With a caring look in her eye and an inviting, somber smile, and her son's hand gently clasped in her own, Tilla spoke; "Blitz… I hope you understand that I am trying to do what is best for you. You know that, right? I couldn't bear to see my own son be seriously hurt because of something which is out of your control. You've been through so much, and I can't stand to see you suffer any more than you already have. Your daughter is a grown adult and is making her own decisions; there's nothing you can do to sway her from that. You can only control what you can do, for your own safety. And for your safety, I believe that it's best that you… let her go."

Then came an awful echo, which although didn't possess any real sound, still managed to deafen Blitz's mind with its sickening dead silent, yet deadly oppressive tinnitus.

Let her go. Let her go. Let her go. Let her go. Let her go. Let her go. ***Let her go.***

<u>Let — Her — Go.</u>

…

"…You're not momma."

It hurt. It hurt Blitz to such an immeasurable extent to accuse his own mother of being nothing but a crude mockery, though he knew increasingly by the second that such the accusation was true. This wasn't his 'mother', the tender and loving mother which he had nothing but the best memories of her — whatever this thing is was far from her. What this 'thing' was, who was now sitting on his couch completely uninvited, was a terrible and deceptive ghoul which had the bile-beckoning gall to imitate his deceased mother, let alone go about it in such a sickening and insulting way. But regardless, being the gullible fool which he had consistently been throughout his entire life thus far, Blitz had fallen into another folly — one perhaps of his own doing. … But no more. No more running away or hiding from his sins. Blitz was going to make a stand, starting now.

A jolt of fear arose within the acutely aware imp as he stared up into his mother's eyes, noticing without a doubt that her eyes, the look they were piercing him with, had grown angry. The piercing stare which those eyes withheld was like nothing which Blitz was familiar with in regards to his mother, further solidifying that whoever this was, was most definitely not the maternal figure which he so dearly missed.

Then came a voice which slithered menacingly out through Tilla's mouth, her lips tightened into a tense line and pressed against her sharp teeth like a fierce and growing scowl. Her voice sounded croaky and suppressed, as if she was trying to hold back her anger, an effort of which was fading fast; "What did you say?"

Blitz was far from being in the mood to back down, deciding that he was going to make a stand to defend not only himself, but as well as his daughter's name. The growingly defensive imp's eyes grew angrier as he stared into "his mother's" own harshened eyes, at last breaking away from the hypnotized state which he was in, like a defiant animal of prey fighting against its would-be assailant.

"I said… You, you piece of shit, are. Not. My motherfucking Momm—NNNGAH!! NNNFF—AGH!!"

Blitz hollers loudly as he feels a wave of sudden pain shoot into his right hand! He looks down to find that his hand was still clutched in the imposter's own, its fingers now tightening harshly and digging into his skin with brute strength!

That's when his "mother" leans right up into his face, hissing with an animalistic and a clenched-toothed scowl like a dreadful beast, now possessing a voice which Blitz no longer recognized as its eyes widened; "Now that's no way to talk to your own dearest mother, now is it?"

Before Blitz could hiss right back with hostile vigor, a putrid smell began to sting his nostrils, making him lurch back with a bile-inducing disgust! The repugnant odor which had smacked Blitz's senses with a near crippling blow was none other than the smell of rot and things left to decay, possessing along with it the faint but prominent scent of sulfur and fresh ash.

That smell… that fucking awful smell of burning… how could he forget it?

It took Blitz practically no time at all to figure out where that wretched smell was coming from, watching to his horror as "Tilla" began to decay slowly but rapidly; her skin becoming tighter and paler around her face, as what would be a month of decomposition unfolded in a matter of seconds! This live timelapse of decomposition transformed "Tilla's" body from a stage of bloating to active decay within no more than five seconds, her eyes quickly becoming bloodshot and wildly evil as her decaying hand tightened even more around her son's, causing him to shriek in terror and agony!

"You best watch your mouth with me, boy!" The rapidly decaying female imp growls with a very uncharacteristic ferocity, the mimicker seeming to have since lost its composure.

"NFF—GAH! Y-You stay— NGAH— away from my daughter, fuckface!" Blitz hissed and sneered, all the while trying to struggle free from his "mother's" unbelievably tight grip from his hand, only to cause himself more horrific pain!

A horrifying guttural guffaw filled the room with its deafening roar when the intruder began to cackle, openly mocking Blitz in his bid to defend Loona; "SHE'S GOING TO DIE, DEAREST!" "Tilla" shrieks with an animalistic shrieking bellowing; "SHE'S GOING TO DIE, AND THERE'S NOTHING YOU AND YOUR SORRY, PATHETIC LITTLE HIDE CAN DO ABOUT IT!!"

This blatant provocative threat was enough to send Blitz into a boiling hot rage! Like HELL his daughter was going to die — not without a goddamn fight! In his newfound wrath, Blitz had hastily

numbed himself to the pain as he made his move to escape, slamming his free arm right down against his “mother’s” gripped arm! This proved to be a mistake for not only did her decaying arm barely budge, but another rotten and putrid hand now gripped tightly around his neck! Bile threatened to raise up Blitz’s restricted throat from the smell of decay as he desperately clawed at his neck to struggle free to no avail, choking and spluttering as the living corpse began to stand up, still holding its victim by the neck and suspending him from the ground! Blitz’s wide, furious, yet terrified eyes began to blur as he struggled to breathe, exhausting all of his efforts in kicking his boots against the imposter and futilely clawing at his neck in a bid for air!

“Tilla’s” now bloodshot and rotting eyes pierced evilly right into Blitz’s own pair, her jaw bones clicking and grinding together as she, in a reptile-like voice which gurgled with phlegm, mouthed the words; “I’ll make sure you join her — right here, right **NOW.**”

Blitz’s chokes began to grow weaker and weaker, the mummified assailant rotting ever more, with her skin tightening and beginning to flake off in places around her ghoulish eyes! His consciousness began to wither away and his eyelids became heavy, his hope of escaping this vile creature’s clutches fading fast… but he stayed defiant. With a weakened left hand, Blitz used the remaining flickers of strength he had to reach for his pistol from within his coat, heaving himself to pull it out and aim directly at the head of this zombified corpse of his mother! The creature let out a terrifying and deafening screech of malice and bloodlust soon as the muzzle met its wide, devilish eyes!

“ROOOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAAAAAAA—”

BANG!!!

Black.

All that Loona could see was black.

Nothing; like a void where no object, thing, or place existed; where nothing thrived or lived; and where nothing breathed. It was like she was in limbo. Not only was it pitch black, but it felt as if she was standing on nothing, almost as if she was floating in some vacant space absent of gravity. It had been like this for at least fifteen minutes, with Loona trying to feel her way through the darkness on the odd second, but with little event. The now truly stuck hellhound began to wonder

to her dread if this she had finally pushed her luck; if she had at last met her fate. This darkness was to be Loona's tomb — a tomb which she subconsciously chose due to her foolishness in believing she could prevail against something much larger and ancient than herself. This was to be her eternal imprisonment.

…

Or so she thought.

For the first time in fifteen long and grueling minutes, Loona began to feel something push against her — a cold, howling, and wholly unforgiving wind which blew right through her fur. What was more about it, was that it felt oh so familiar. Then came another sensation — a coldness upon her feet, which Loona was quick to recognize to be snow. … Then came a voice, bellowing and cutting through the howling wind.

"POSLUSHAY!!"

Suddenly a burst of light stings Loona's eyes, causing her to wince and grind her teeth together against the temporary blindness! After allowing her vision to adjust, Loona opens her eyes to a slitted squint, peering out into her new surroundings to assess the situation she now found herself in. She was quick to discover that, indeed, she was amidst a land covered in snow, with the wind carrying so much more of it as it blew ruthlessly and casted a blinding mist like a violent, relentless beast made of gales and frost. A closer squint through her still adjusting eyes proved to Loona that off into the distance a good fifty feet away, were three figures — two of them tall and slim, and the figure which they flanked shorter and evidently corpulent.

The short and fatter figure spoke in the same guttural voice, slurring his words with an almost drunken drawl in a certain thick Eastern European accent; " Segodnya! Vse… v-vy predstanete pered nami po obvineniyu v gosudarstvennoy izmene... i-i– urgh— i sotrudnichestve s vragami dela, a znachit, i naroda!"

Loona furrowed her brow as she continued to squint at the distant figure, about to move forward… but she couldn't. Before Loona could even make her first step across the snow towards the speaker, she is jolted back by something holding her in place by her arms. She turns her head to look behind her, discovering that her arms had been fastened behind her back, and then around a five-foot wooden post. A wave of alarm and adrenaline washed over Loona like a wave as she spun her head back around, facing the three figures standing before her, noticing that the men flanking the short, corpulent, and possibly drunken speaker with a rifle each slung over their shoulders.

Though the Cyrillic language was still very foreign to her, Loona seemed to understand the shorter man to a limited but sufficient extent as he continued; “ Eto obvineniya, k kotorym my ne otnosimsya legkomyslenno! Bol'shevistskoye delo ne poterpit takikh kollaboratsionistov! Itak, na osnovanii etikh prestupleniy, v kotorykh vy vse kollektivno obvinyayetes', my prishli k vyvodu! Po obvineniyu v sotrudnichestve s vragom dela vam vsem grozit rasstrel!”

The last word in the apparent sentencing stung viscously into Loona’s very being, stinging far harder than the relentless winter wind blowing through her fur, and even straight through the jacket she still wore. Her eyes widened with abstract fear as she at last understood the reality of what was about to happen.

‘*Rasstrel*’ — Execution.

In her heightened state of terrified alertness, Loona began to notice even more about her surroundings, particularly the fact that she wasn’t alone. Standing alongside Loona to both her left and right were men in the exact same harrowing position as she was. They were all dressed in a mixture of gray and khaki-colored uniforms, most of them sporting the same style of ‘Furajka’ cap, made of bright maroon and white, as well as a cap badge above their black visors indicating their rank. Though their faces varied from young to old, from anywhere between clean-shaven to coated with a straggled beard, each and every one of those unfortunate men looked terrified, yet ready to meet their fate — though hatred and resentment against their would-soon-be executioners burned defiantly in each and every one of their eyes.

But that was not all that Loona noticed, her left eye twitching in reaction to a lively glow off to her leftmost peripheral vision. When her eyes met with the source of the bright orange flare, they widened with horrified recognition — it was the Saint Sophia Cathedral, glowing wildly as a raging inferno burnt within it, engulfing everything inside and gutting the gargantuan structure like jackals picking the bones of a corpse. Loona’s mouth fell agape, a terrible gaping forming in her stomach as she came to the realization — she was in the midst and a part of ‘history’, albeit a very unwilling participant, who was going to experience the same pain thousands upon thousands of men, women, and children had felt in that certain inhumane conflict.

She was going to die.

“No… Nonono, fuck!” Loona began to struggle desperately against the rope tied against the post she stood in front of, her mind now firmly fixated on survival! An increasingly panicked Loona thrashes and pulls against the tight restraints around her wrists, trying to grip her feet into the snow only for them to slip!

As Loona struggled for dear life, the short and rotund silhouette reached his closing statement, the influence of alcohol evident in his continued slurred speech; “I vasha respublika, i vash Tsar' mertvy! I skoro vy vse k nim prisoyedinites'!”

The words stung into the panicking hellhound’s very fiber, the desire to escape now overwhelming and her fight-or-flight instincts threatening to take over! Before Loona could make another attempt at escape, a horrific sound screeches from the near distance behind the three figures — a woman screaming desperately. The collective eyes of both the ‘Prisoners of War’, Loona, and the executioners turn towards the source of the noise — struggling against the forceful grip of another armed silhouette was a woman, crying and begging for the execution to stop, and for the perpetrators to show mercy. ‘Mercy’, however, was a strange word to the silhouette, who threw the distraught sobbing woman to the ground and then—

BAM!!!

Thwump!

…

The show trial continued unphased — and so did Loona’s desperate struggle, now emboldened and reinforced like forged steel as she pulled against the restraints, her feet digging and slipping into the icy ground! As she struggled against her imprisonment, Loona noticed that emerging from behind the initial three figures from the veil of thick winter fog were even more men; militiamen with gaunt and dead-eyed faces, dressed in long coats and ‘budenovka’ hats, their rifles clasped firmly in their hands and ready to take aim at a moment’s notice. For every prisoner lined up in that one-way ticket to death’s door, there was a soldier — this included Loona.

When Loona finally realized that pulling and struggling was no use in these conditions, she began screaming through angry clenched jaws and her scarlet eyes wide and wild; “LET ME GO, YOU PIECES OF DOGSHIT!! I’LL KILL YOU!! I’LL KILL THE WHOLE LOT OF YOU!!”

They didn’t listen.

Loona tries again with even more ferocious vigor; “YOU HEAR ME OVER THERE, YOU FAT FUCK?! I KNOW YOU CAN HEAR ME!! I’LL GUT YOU LIKE A FISH, AND I’LL WATCH

YOU BLEED OUT!!”

This wild and savage threat seemed to catch the corpulent figure’s attention, his head snapping right in Loona’s direction in an instant. Despite his eyes being veiled by a layer of darkness from his rugged officers cap’s visor, Loona knew that he was staring angrily at her, provoked by her words.

Seeing that she had managed to visibly enraged her would-be executioner, Loona gave off a wide provocative grin of defiance despite the overwhelming fear she felt. With a shaky yet booming voice, Loona yells; “Y-Yeah, that’s right, you fat fuck! I’m talking to you! Now LET ME GO!!”

Initially there was no response, the short and rotund figure staring coldly in Loona’s direction, seeming to glare at her with cold, unwavering analysis. Suddenly the man begins to head directly towards Loona, marching swiftly towards her with his black boots crunching against the thick powdery snow, his posture full of enragement and purpose for what he intended to do. The gap between himself and the restrained hellhound got ever shorter by the second; fifty feet became forty, then thirty five, then twenty…

…fifteen…

…ten…

…five…

…one…

…then barely an inch.

Loona snarled a ferocious growl at her captor, glaring at him with a mixture of defiance, anger, and fear for her life. She glares intensely into the general area of his eyes, which were still thickly veiled by the shadowy pitch blackness which seemed to be produced by his cap’s visor. Loona could at last make out more features of this ragged, horrid man: His dark khaki green officer’s cap was tired and ragged, a hastily sewn-on red star branding his allegiance above the visor for all to see. Matching his cap’s shabby appearance was his long dark coat, one which protruded and strained against his bloated guy ill-fittingly. Directly over his worn coat, the commissar sported a

bandelier, and a waist belt which holstered a pistol. Causing Loona to especially grimace in disgust was his face; one which was coated with a thin, straggled beard, and deep cutting wrinkles across his blemished face like caverns and gullies. Only serving to emphasize his poorly, unkempt appearance was the strong scent of alcohol which hung around him like a stench.

Once more after a shaky breath which showed in the sub-zero air in the form of a puff, Loona growls once more, declaring in defiance; “I-I’m not afraid of you…”

This provoked a sickening toothy grin from the commissar, a low phlegmy chuckle emanating from his throat like the call of a crocodile. Loona’s eyes widened in even more fury and fear when her captor answered in perfect English; “You will be.”

Before Loona could answer back, the commissar suddenly pulled out his pistol from its holster, then directly pressed the barrel against Loona’s forehead! Loona gasps as she shuts her eyes, bracing herself for the worst!

…

But the ‘worst’ never came.

Loona cautiously opens her eyes into a faint squint, discovering… that she was no longer in a firing line of some snow-caked plains. Now, she found herself seated and tied down in a chair in some dark and dingy room; a single, faintly flickering, sodium-vapor bulb lighting up as much as it could in the barren space in front of its lone occupant. The foul smell of dampness and age lingered in the air of this room Loona now found herself in, the stench so intrusive to her senses that it physically distressed her. In her renewed alertness, the still restrained hellhound darts her eyes around the room beyond the inadequate light of the overhanging bulb, trying to make out some form of shape — to little avail. The only thing Loona was able to make out was the old wooden door which lay just outside the range of the flickering bulb, the veil of pitch blackness which filled the room relentlessly threatening to completely absorb it.

“Wh— What the fuck…” Loona gasped through panicked breathing, still recovering from the fear for her life which she felt, and to a point still did.

Then came a sound. An awful sound, within the darkness off to Loona’s right. It was the casual whistling of some indistinguishable tune. Loona darts her wide and alert eyes towards the direction of the sound, a deep pit forming in her stomach once again as fear once again rises within her, like

smoke from a raging fire, threatening to choke whoever inhaled its toxic fumes. Immediately Loona noticed a pear of two sickly-looking yellow pinpoints looking directly at her, cutting into her very being, accompanying the whistling which echoed throughout the chamber. Then came a very familiar and croaky voice.

“I was wondering when you’d wake up, girlie.”

???? Hours Until The Ritual.

Pandemonium - III

Loona's eyes glare intensely into the dark towards the two small, gloomy yellow pinpoints, trying desperately to make out the approximate shape and stature of their owner. This effort was "rewarded" with no avail, seeming as though the hidden specter of a man seemed to blend perfectly into the impossible darkness, as if he belonged. The tightly restrained hellhound growls low and intensely, baring her teeth in a show of vigorous defiance against her presumed captor, outrightly disregarding her current less-than-desirable position. Out of all of the currently uncertain things with this place Loona now found herself in, one thing was absolutely for certain; she had heard that voice before. Loona continues to glare at the set of dimly glowing yellow 'irises' as they appear to look down at something.

Tck! … Tck! Tck! ~Fwwssss~...

The faint hissing sound of a newly lit flame penetrates the stillness of the room as a light appears, illuminating both the old steel lighter it came from, and a minuscule glimpse of its owner. Revealed from the miniature flame's light glow was a section of dark brown fabric, one which looked poorly and ragged in its condition. The worn leather belt which adjoined both the still shadow-cloaked figure's dirty white shirt and trousers showed Loona that the lighter was being held at the 'specter's' waist height, and that the brown fabric was a part of a coat. Clasped around the shimmering silver casing of the lighter's square body was a fingerless-gloved hand, the ends of which displayed their wearer's almost skeletal fingertips, with sickly mummified skin which looked to be in the mid-stages of active decay. With the lighter's flame now lit and dimly glowing its insufficient orange hue, the gloved hand raises the lighter up towards his face, the minimal light revealing a brown cigar clenched between two rotting and filthy teeth, like a hyper-focused but dim torch.

Fsssssshhh…

Immediately as the flame touches the cigar, it begins burning faintly, the otherwise damp and musty room now being filled with the scent of the flavored cigar. The shadowy figure promptly extinguishes his lighter before sliding it back into his long, dark coat, finally stepping out from the darkness, and underneath the flickering bulb barely lighting the space below it, like a stage's spotlight.

It was Victor Malloy, and slung over his right shoulder was his lever-action rifle.

Malloy puffs slowly on his cigar between his teeth as he reaches his free boney hand up to the bulb, turning it slightly which ceases the flickering and lights up the room by a few extra inches. The practically “living” corpse of a man cranes his head back down and burns his eyes deeply at Loona, finally curdling in his throaty voice; “Well shit, girlie, I didn’t think it’d be this easy to lure ya in. I always thought you were a bit stupid, but Jesus Christ.”

Loona stays completely silent and still, glaring angrily at her captor. To Loona’s further anger, Malloy mocks her look by mimicking it right back, giving it a slightly exaggerated spin on his rotted, mummified face. The vile man hisses and chuckles throatily, the sound of phlegmish coughing following soon after.

After coughing momentarily and continuing to chuckle, Malloy adds; “Oh, piss off with that look, ya bitch! You’re not getting anywhere with it.”

“FUCK!! — YOU!!” Loona snaps loudly, her voice echoing throughout the room as she emphasized each syllable! Her sharp teeth glimmered slightly from the bulb’s light as her neck fur stood completely upright, only further emphasizing her untamed rage!

“Yeah, and neither will that language of yours…” Malloy growls back as he waved a dismissive hand, his joints clicking and scraping together underneath his sickly coat.

In a slow waltzing fashion, Malloy begins pacing aimlessly in circles underneath the ‘spotlight’, his left fingers bracing his newly lit cigar to his mouth and his right arm hanging lazily by his side. For a moment, the reanimated corpse pauses with his back turned towards Loona as he puffs his cigar, holding the smoke within his breath momentarily before audibly breathing out; plumes of smoke pouring out between his teeth. Loona could now clearly see the lever-action rifle Malloy had resting over his shoulders, noticing that while the otherwise poorly condition of the stock remained much the same, the hellhound could tell that he had taken the time to make it usable, which included a new barrel and trigger, among other minor details. One thing about it, however, concerned Loona the most — since having not seen it since their last confrontation, the rifle now sported a faintly glowing silver pattern around the stock and barrel. It had been ‘blessed’, and God knows what he was going to use it for.

Malloy pointed a finger up with his free hand as he spun around, acting as though he had just remembered something, the spent ash from the cigar falling like snow to the ground as it twirled around with him; “So, tell me! Didja like the show?”

“...Wh–wha—”

“Well go on, spit it out!”

Loona cocks her head, giving her captor a cautious but hateful look; “What? W-What the hell are you talking about, what goddamn ‘show’?”

Malloy let out a light exacerbated groan as though the answer was obvious; “The little scene you were just involved in! With the revolutionaries, the-the POWs, the executions — that show, dickhead! Jesus— did you think that was real or something, that you were actually there?! Well either way, I’m glad it was convincing enough for ya!”

For an extra moment of his time, Malloy paused as he stared right back into Loona’s piercing, hateful gaze, glaring at her in an almost scornful way. He raised the cigar back up to his teeth before abruptly hesitating before he could take yet another puff, deciding to further ridicule Loona further with another brief chuckle; “Heheh, ahh fucking ‘ell… I can see the gears turning in that little head of yours, luv’. I know how to do shit like that, you know? I can mimic quite a lot. Yanno, uh… different people, different voices… I can even influence the places you go to, as you just saw. All thanks to those mates I’ve made some agreements with.”

Loona’s eyes widened, coming to an unsettling revelation; “W-Wait, so… T-That German guy, the Priest, they… they were all—”

“Nah-nah-nah-nah-nah, fuck no! Fuck no!” Malloy was quick to dismiss Loona’s suspicions, pausing to take his umpteenth inhale of his cigar, allowing the smoke to pour out from his decaying mouth as he spoke; “They weren’t me! Those two bastards, a-and the whole cabal with Heaven and shit, they’re the real deal! Heaven is actually watching this unfold, I know they are… and I know full fucken well that they’ve been helping you along. What I have is pretty much, uhh… the-the same abilities as they have, but different, yanno? Again, back to the deal I made with those beings you’ve heard so much about… and Lucifer.”

“Lucifer…” Loona repeats back, the sudden drop of a somewhat familiar name hitting her like a brick and disorientating her.

The reanimated corpse nods his head slowly, widening his eyes to bring home the reality; “Yeah, him.”

Loona gave herself a few seconds to process the information, before violently shaking her head in denial and rebuked; “N-No, that’s bullshit! He wouldn’t! You’re a bald-faced liar!!”

An intense and deafening silence quickly filled the room as Loona and Malloy stared daggers, their eyes glaring deeply into each other with mutual fierceness. Once again it was Malloy who broke the silence, seemingly commanding the space he stood within, maintaining his evil dead-eyed look at his captive.

After tapping away some loose ash from the cigar, Malloy utters; “Mm. … Here’s something you gotta understand with me, woman; I’m many things. I’m a killer, a liar, a psychopath, a sociopath, so on and so on. I’ve heard it all before, and I’m not ashamed to admit it, because that’s exactly who and what I am. … But in saying that, you know what else I can do? I can tell the truth. I can tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but it, even if it’s brutal. … Now I’m telling you the full fucken truth when I say that Lucifer set me up with a deal. He said, and I quote, that I could have ‘anything I wanted’, including eternal power and prolonged life, even after death. He let the ‘Congregors’ know that I wanted that, and from that day forward, my wishes were no longer his business. But he watches me. He watches me and the things which have been unfolding with keen interest, him and his pathetic white duds. … I asked him something as well, not too long ago… it was about you. I asked him if I could kill you, in the event that you got too much in the fucken way. … You know what he said, girlie? He said ‘go right ahead, I couldn’t care less’, that would be ‘pleasantly surprised’ if I managed to.”

Loona was left speechless, her life and everything along with it flashing before her very eyes in the form of this grotesque mummified cadaver.

Malloy continues; “See? Even the devil doesn’t care about ya. He would allow anyone to die, even his own “subjects”. … In truth, though, I really don’t want to kill you, yanno? That's why I brought ya here. Do you know where we are?”

“...Not a clue…” Loona utters quietly, shaking her head solemnly after roughly five seconds of reflective stagnation, letting Malloy’s brutal and hard confession sink in.

Malloy’s decaying skin audibly cracked as he raised his brow, seemingly unconvinced by Loona’s admission; “Hm! So you’re telling me you’ve come out all this way, done all of what you’ve done, only to not have the foggiest of where you are right now. … This is it, woman! You wanted to find me, here at this abandoned coal mine, and now you’re here! Front row bloody seat! BUT! You don’t have to be here. In fact, to be frank, I don’t want you here either! So, I want to talk.”

Loona mustered up the strength again to glare daggers at her captor, growling; “About what?”

“A peace agreement,” Malloy slyly drawls, fiddling momentarily with the cigar intertwined between his rotted fingers. He slowly waltzes around Loona as he continues, gesturing the butt-end of the cigar in her general direction; “You gotta understand another thing about me, girlie. I know things, far too many things. Now me, personally… the truth is, as I said, that I really don’t wanna deal with you any longer than I need to. I’d like you completely out of this. But you know, you’ve been getting in the way for the past fucken fortnight for **FAR TOO LONG NOW**. I know you’ve been working against me. You spoke to Francis, you spoke to that coward Jack Foster, and now? You’ve come here with the intention to get in the way directly. … With this.”

While still looming threateningly over Loona, Malloy fishes something from his rightmost coat pocket, his almost skeletal and tendril-like fingers clattering gently against something which sounded metallic. Like a sea serpent of folklore arising from the depths, Malloy raises his hand with the contents in his pocket pinched between his fingers, its silver pattern glowing gloomily — it was the blessed bullet. Loona’s heart sank upon seeing it out of her clutches, her mouth agape as she mouthed to herself a breathless, despairing ‘no’.

With a look of malice and mockery, Malloy shoves the bullet up to Loona’s face by barely a few inches, displaying it like a hunting trophy; “What’s this, huh? Were you gonna shoot me with this?”

The living cadaver eyes his captive relentlessly, hungry for an answer which he for certain already knew. Loona, however, didn’t respond — nothing but a cold, hard, deeply-impactful sta—

THWACK!!!

“NGAH!!”

Loona’s ears rang furiously after being dealt a gunshot-loud smack right across her face, throwing her head forcefully to the left!

“I’ll ask again. Was that your plan, or not?” Malloy growled once again, his voice eerily calm especially for the physical abuse he had just dished out.

The hellhound let out a cough and an uneasy light chuckle, trying her best to defy the temperamental brute. After successfully refocusing her eyes while ignoring the burning pain to the right side of her muzzle, Loona spits; “T-That’s the gist of it, you.. hah—y-you rotten dickrider!”

Malloy cocks his head slightly, causing what was left of his decrepit joints to crack with a sickening ‘pop’, not once taking his yellow irises off Loona. He takes another drag of his smoldering cigar, holding the smoke within his withering lungs as he leans in close and blows the smoke in Loona’s still aching face, sending her into a brief but disorienting coughing fit.

After “kindly” allowing her to clear her lungs first, Malloy rhetorically asks Loona; “You gotta lot of fucken nerve, don’t ya?”

“Sh—ACK! S-Sure..,” Loona was quick to hiss right back, clearing out the last of the second-hand cigar smoke from her throat; “A-About just as much to match your pathetic excuse of a soul!”

“HAH! My soul?!” Malloy cackles bombastically; “I stopped caring for that shit long ago! Me? I’m-I’m a far stronger bastard without it! That’s evident in me being able to hypnotize ya, and send you running directly for me! Come on, give me some credit — I outsmarted some dumb ***MUTT*** armed with a Gewehr 98!”

All that the gloating and borderline-insane corpse could get out of Loona was yet even more cold and hateful glaring, the hellhound staying as silent as the space around her. Finally after a heaving breath and with her ears now ringing faintly, Loona hisses; “What do you want from me?”

“What? … Ahhh, right! So you’re finally for that peace agreement now, aren’t ya?” Malloy came to “realize” once again, his tone sly and plotting; “Well shit, I never thought you’d finally come to your senses. You beauty! … Now listen up, yeah? Here’s what’s going to happen; You’re going to leave, and I’ll in turn leave you alone. You’re not worth my time. Not only are you not worth my time, but you’re also doing nothing but making things harder for yourself. I know you more than you think, girlie. You don’t want this, not really. You want to live silently, go at your own pace, to have an opportunity to, uh, ‘form your own course’ if you get what I’m saying.”

Though Loona for all intents and purposes had no interest in listening for what Malloy’s so-called ‘peace terms’ would be, she listened earnestly.

“Look at yourself, for Christ’s sake,” Malloy slurs slyly, coughing slightly as he takes another brief pull of his still smoldering cigar; “You’re tied to a chair in the back of some damp, dark room in an

abandoned mining camp. And for what, huh? For what? You gotta start asking yourself the big questions here." In another attempt to appear even more intimidating and boasting his advantage over Loona, Malloy leans in close and prods a rotted finger into the hellhound's right shoulder; "What do you really want?"

Loona managed to strain out a snarl before hesitating the very next second, subconsciously pausing herself to reflect on the question for a moment of "calm" reflection. Now Loona didn't know exactly why she was entertaining the question obviously designed to second-guess herself, but nevertheless she thought on it.

What did she want?

The deeply personal question, if anything, managed to pierce through a veil of fabric in the very fiber of her being like a shiv — elegant, sharp, and above all professional in its cut. It had a surprisingly lasting effect on Loona, effectively putting her in a trance. For a moment, the now deeply pensive hellhound's lips quivered as she tried to come up with an answer, all the while trying to resist the urge to give in; a task which was becoming harder and harder by the second, Loona finding herself being tempted ever further as though she was being coaxed unknowingly.

Eventually, at any rate, Loona gave her reply, her voice still gruff yet wavering in its tone; "I want this to be over… Yeah, tha—that's what I want! I want you gone, and I want all of this to end! I want my fucking life back!!"

"And you can get it back!" Malloy once again bombastically exclaims, shaking his head slowly in a demeaning way as he stared right into Loona's own pained eyes; "You just have to do what I say! Call it a day, and go home! Never come back! We will both go our separate ways, and your own soul will never be on the chopping block ever again!"

"…What did you just say?" Loona froze, staring with full attention at her still looming and heavily smoking captor.

As he took another hearty drag of his cigar which by this point was no more than a thumb-lengthed stub, Malloy stared coldly at Loona with an expression which suggested he found her question almost ludicrous, yet hardly surprising. It was as if he knew that Loona would inevitably inquire more, seeing how she had managed to make it thus far. With a light but guttural cackle in a nauseating testimony to his withering, shriveled lungs, Malloy elaborates; "Oh yeah, I haven't told ya! Yeah mate, they've been looking at your soul for a number of days now. They reckon that if

you keep going the way you're going that your soul, your… fiber, will be sufficient enough if I'm not able to make ends meet."

A thunderous bolt of fear shot right through Loona's heart, causing it to flutter and spasm. Raw emotion then struck Loona's mind as she began violently thrashing against the restraints, causing the chair to bang and rock loudly against the floor, all the while snarling and screaming at the top of her lungs in a blind defensive rage! Loona barks and hisses with great almost rabid ferocity, her eyes burning with pure crimson rage as she pelted Malloy with all the extremities she knew of! In spite of her explosive outburst of rage, the reanimated corpse didn't flinch, remaining disturbingly collected and calculated in his lack of reaction. Eventually though, Malloy figured that Loona's right to her outburst was over, proceeding to give her yet another "***THWACK!***" right across her face! This interrupts the hellhound's rabid explosion of rage as she yelps in agony once again, the ringing from her ears returning and lasting for a few seconds which seemed like an eternity.

Malloy allows Loona to recover from this second slap before gesturing the smoldering end of his cigar at her like a substitute finger; "You're starting to piss me off, you know that? Don't push it with me, I'm warning you from now."

"Yeah! And I'm not fucking listening!" Loona barks defiantly, still discombobulated by the second gunshot-loud smack across her face.

"But you will," the captor hisses earnestly, cigar smoke pooling out from between his horrid teeth like the fires of hell itself; "You're going to leave, you're never going to come back, and you're going to forget that you even ended up in Australia in the bloody first place. Your life will be quiet, I promise you! You might think I'm full of shit, but I'm giving you as honest of a word I can muster to give to you. … Let me rephrase something to ya; you've always wanted your own life, haven't ya?"

"You know you keep saying that, but I don't know what you're getting at! Quit with the riddles and shit, get to your point!" Loona breathlessly asks with intensity, staring with thus far uncompromising defensiveness. As she stares, the hellhound couldn't help but passively notice that the restraints around her wrists seemed to be weaker, though not by much.

Malloy, at his own will, didn't digress; "You haven't been in control of your life for a long while, Loona, if ever. I know it, and you know it. The pound, that "father" of yours and his dumb business ventures, and now this."

Loona silently denied this, or at least half of it.

“Time and time again, you’ve been kicked to the curb, treated as nothing more than some sort of living cosmetic,” Malloy slurred through another compulsive drag of his cigar which was now just barely a thumb length; “That impish little rat bastard, Blitz; he doesn’t care for you. All he’s done is argue and argue against you, time and time again, all the while ruining everything he touches. The party you went to where he got himself shitfaced for example, the one with that ‘Vortex’ bloke. Need I remind you that your “father” almost got himself and that ‘Moxxie’ lad killed, and relied on you and that ‘Millie’ chick to get them both out? Where was his thanks, huh? After all that? Nowhere to be seen or heard, hey? Nowhere to be seen or heard. He has no appreciation for anyone. For him, it’s all ‘help me, help me, be with me’! But! When push comes to shove, he never gives it back. Those other two as well — ‘Millie’, ‘Moxxie’ — they sure as hell didn't express their thanks either. They never have. They couldn’t give less of a shit about you. If anything, girlie, they absolutely detest you. When was the last time you heard a form of gratitude, after all you’ve put up with from them?”

In a moment which made Loona sick to her stomach amidst all of the throbbing pain she felt from being slapped into submission twice… she began to agree. In fact, the restrained hellhound had been left speechless. In a sick, twisted, and dare say ‘brutally honest’ kind of way, Malloy was right. He was too right.

“S-Stop it!” Loona protested, obviously shaken; “Shut your mouth!”

Her protest was futile.

“Face it,” Malloy continued; “You’re putting burdens upon yourself, burdens which you can opt out of at any time. Sometimes you need to let things go to improve your own life. Selfishness isn’t inherently awful, sometimes it’s necessary.”

Loona furrows her brow in outright protest, opening her mouth to speak before the words ultimately died on her lips. The nihilistic realization that perhaps her captor was right rocked Loona to her very core, making her despondent for a brief time. In no exaggeration, the sobered hellhound felt as though she realized that everything she knew, from Lucifer to even those who she was meant to trust, was all a blatant, ugly lie.

“But all of that can change right here, right now,” the captor gurgles with his throat full of smoke and rot; “You can finally forge your own path without interference. The world is full of opportunities and you gotta reap it to find happiness, yanno? Sometimes that requires cutting off ends that are detrimental to you. Accept the peace agreement, and you’ll be free from not only what is about to unfold within the next two hours, but from the rubbish you deal with daily.”

…

“...No.”

A simple yet potent answer, Loona’s voice echoing through the room like a light cutting through the pitch darkness. Something had won within her, something powerful — Internus Victoriam.

For the first time since this arduous ordeal began, it seemed as though Malloy had let his influence slip, the look of savage annoyance growing across his wrinkled face proving that he knew it, too. He scowled; “The hell did you just say—?”

Loona squeezed out a defiant snicker through her thinly grinning lips, knowing now that it was her turn to take the reins of this horrific ‘shitshow’, to put it mildly. With a hissing chuckle, Loona states; “You heard me, you miserable, disgusting, senile old man. If you think I’m going to do a single thing you say, you’re lying to yourself, cause I’m going to see this to the very end. Did I want any of the bullfuckery I’ve been through? Hell no, as if! Have I made mistakes through this and endangered people around me? Yes, yes I have, and I take full responsibility for all of that pain. I regret it all so much. … You wanna know what I don’t regret? Saving Jim, tearing you a new one, talking to Frank and Jake or whatever their names are, and most of all, I don’t regret getting in your way. I’m going to see the end of this, and I will be your downfall. You hear me, Victor? You can take your dumbass peace terms, AND BLOW THEM OUT YOUR ASS!! Fuck Lucifer, fuck those weirdo shadowy freaks, and most of all, FUCK YOU!!”

Just as she finishes her answer to Malloy’s ultimatum, Loona begins laughing. She didn’t know exactly why she was laughing; the hopelessness of it all? The fact she had insulted her captor to his face? A glimmer of wildly deceptive hope, perhaps? Regardless, she laughed and laughed, not once moving her eyes away from Malloy, staring right into his very soul, or lack thereof. Loona’s reverberating laughter lasted for another half a minute, tears streaming down her face as she grinned and cackled! It was maniacal! The hellhound kept laughing, all the while Malloy just stood there and stared.

“WELL GO ON, PUSSY!!” Loona booms provocatively, pulling against the restraints which seemed to loosen ever-so-slightly, showing signs that they had reached a weak point; “DO IT! KILL ME RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW! I KNOW YOU WANT TO!!”

…

"…Brave," Malloy coldly answers after a short pause in silence, the only sound emanating being the tail-end of Loona's boisterous laughter; "You're very brave. Braver than most… But you're stupid. You're the **STUPIDEST BITCH** I've ever met. … You've signed your death warrant, you know that? You're a dead whore walking."

This only served to cause Loona to grin wider; "HAH!! Do you have any idea how little that means to me? You wanna know something? I'm pretty sure I've ALWAYS been dead to myself! No direction, no sense of belonging to a family, NO NOTHING!! Hell, I STILL don't know what I want! I was hoping that would eventually come, but no — I guess being tied to a chair and shot by some senile old cockjockey is my fate!"

Loona's openly defeatist admission had little in the way of physical reaction to Malloy, though his off-yellow glowing irises did analyze the hellhound with the faintest hint of surprise — perhaps he never expected her to admit such a thing. Tears streamed down Loona's face as she continued to grin defiantly; "Then why don't you just shoot me right here, huh?! Go on, just do it! I fucking dare you!!"

As Loona's voice finally died out, the loud sound of her booming speech was replaced with the equally loud sound of dead silence. The hellhound watched intensely through her misty eyes as Malloy shook his head slowly, remaining silent as he seemingly pondered to himself. After one final drag of his flavored cigar, the reanimated husk flicks the remnant stub to the ground and crushes it with the toe of his worn shoe, his movement smooth and eerily, intricately calculated. Soon as he made sure his ex-cigar was surely put out, he lifted his head back up towards Loona, her obstinate gaze never faltering once, nor showing signs of such.

With a throaty exhale and another shake of his head, Malloy flatly asks; "Is this how you want it to end with you?"

Loona remained completely silent, her grin since faded into an angry deadpan stare. She had said her piece, made her undying conviction known, and she was outrightly willing to sacrifice herself for it — Constantem Internus Fortitudinem.

"Right." Malloy quietly mumbles, nodding his head as he reaches for his lever-action rifle, bringing it forth from his shoulder into his grasp and holds it lengthwise across his pelvis. He stood there quietly, staring coldly through Loona's eyes as Loona returned the look in sheer earnest. Nothing which Malloy could do would shake this courageous hellhound anymore, and the corpse of a man knew this too well. … The staring ceased when the captor brought the stock up to his right shoulder, proceeding to aim directly at Loona's—

BANG—BANG—BANG!!!

"VICK! We have a problem!"

Loona jumps as the door shakes with three loud knocks from the other side, another masculine voice reverberating from the other side!

"What's it now??" Malloy growls, not once faltering from his aim in between Loona's eyes.

"Look, we need you to come look! It's serious!" The muffled voice pleads, the faint unmistakable crack of gunfire coming from somewhere in the far distance, somewhere from the outside world.

"Oh for fuck sakes— **CAN'T YOU DEAL WITH IT YOURSELVES?!**" Malloy barks loudly, at last breaking his aim from Loona as he snaps his whole body towards the door; "The hell do I give you lot guns for?!"

Without paying any more attention to Loona as though she was nothing to him, Malloy barges right through the door and slams it behind him with a loud "*BANG*"!

And with that, Loona was alone. The hellhound, shaking with adrenaline, let out a shaky breath as she at last relaxed herself, finding much needed temporary solace in the fact that she had been given at least a few extra minutes to live. One thing, and one thing only was on Loona's rushing mind as she reevaluated her position — 'escape'. She needed to escape! She needed to free herself from the restraints bound around her hands and feet! But… how? How would she do that? … Could she try pulling against them again? With no other obvious feasible option at her disposal, that's exactly what Loona did, thrashing and pulling against the restraints binding her to the chair! As she does so, she hears yet another faint crack of gunfire, confirming to Loona that, indeed, some form of firearm exchange was taking place, from within the building she found herself in or otherwise. Without even a second's delay, Loona continues writhing against the rope!

"HNNG!! C-Come on! NNNGAH–!!" Loona whines desperately to herself between each breath she took, her wrists and ankles beginning to hurt in protest against the force being put upon them… but Loona struggled on!

Before long, however, the pain from her desperate struggle got too much to bear, forcing Loona to cease her writhing temporarily!

"NGH, RRAGH!!" Loona whines loudly to herself through the pain, panting through her hurried breath!

After giving herself a moment to recuperate herself, Loona stifles her breath and begins wriggling again, tugging hard against the restraints around her wrists! Then, after much struggle…

Snap!

"GAH! Oh thank fuck!" Loona blew a sigh of relief, at last managing to free her wrists from the rope which had finally given way!

She brings her hands forward from behind the chair and briefly massages her wrists, the relief which the hellhound felt so blissful and liberating amidst everything she had been through. Before long, Loona reached down and pulled away at the rope binding her ankles by the tightly-looped knot which held them in place, taking a little bit of finicking before they finally fell away to the floor! At last, Loona was free! She stood up with no hesitation, the liberating feeling of standing on her own two feet gratifying in its feeling, giving herself some time to pace around underneath the illumination of the singular bulb which hung directly overhead. As Loona paced around, her left foot came into contact with something small and metallic, causing it to lightly rattle as it rolled gently. This caused the hellhound to look down and find that, to her sheer luck, that the small, cylindrical object was in fact the blessed bullet, staring right back at her and beckoning for her to pick it up.

Loona does so, picking up her means of defense and closing it tightly in her palm, holding onto it as if her life depended on it — which it did in all actuality. With the hard part now out of the way, Loona set her sights on the weathered wooden door standing before her, approaching it with extreme caution. Soon as the hellhound reached right up to the door, she pressed her ear up against its surface, listening out into the unknown. Indeed there was a sound, one which Loona heard only faintly, but one which hardly remedied the deafening silence; it was the sound of desolation, one which sounded like a low, vibrating hum, and heralded to all who listened that nothing thrived here, except for hopelessness and death.

Bam! ... Crak-Crak! ... Bang!

The far distant sounds of gunfire emanated once more, faintly interrupting the low, desolate hum. Something big was happening, and the time was more than right for Loona to act decisively. After a moment of hesitation and stifling her nerves, the lone hellhound sighs, holds her breath, and pushes the door open.

Two Hours Remain…

Pandemonium - IV

The scent of copper and ammonia was strong as it lingered through the air, tainting the air within the palace like the swift spread of mustard gas. Despite the concerning stench, the scent wasn't from the likes of blood or such, at least not yet — it was the smell of something medicinal, and experimental in its nature. The sound of swiveling castor wheels accompanied the smell as an incubus nurse and succubus physician wheeled it down the massive hallway towards Stolas' room, all the while being flanked by a highly anxious Octavia who followed closely behind.

"As soon as we enter the patient's room, we start the treatment immediately," the succubus physician whispers urgently to her work companion; "Do you understand?"

The incubus nurse nods in utter compliance, followed by a brief and silent 'yep' in acknowledgement, his hands firmly grasped around the bar to guide the medical trolley along.

"It's imperative that you focus today, alright? If something goes wrong here, we're both royally fucked and then some!" The physician harshly whispers once more, though loud enough for Octavia to hear it loud and clear; "Soon as we get in, start hooking the patient to the IV bag in his right forearm — carefully."

"R-Right," the nurse affirms nervously; "Do you think the restraints will hold him in place?"

The physician gives her assistant a look of indecisive nervousness as she opens her mouth to speak, only for the words she was about to form to die on her lips, the hesitancy to predict the worst outcomes greatly influential. The succubus averts her attention once more town towards the hallway, her eyes meeting to see another nurse — an imp this time — striding with a light urgent jog towards them, a look of worry on her scarlet and white-freckled face. Upon seeing Octavia who was apparently just as nervous as she, the imp nurse gave a light nod of recognition before immediately speaking with the physician which dwarfed her.

The imp's lightly nasally voice sounded audibly on-edge and skittish, yet professional despite the circumstances; "Took you long enough."

"How's it looking in there?" The physician asked in earnest, barely wasting a heartbeat to answer.

“It’s difficult,” the imp nurse obliged to answer with her utmost sincerity; “His condition’s so far stable, but he’s been showing signs of becoming disoriented and erratic again.”

“Does he still respond to vocal direction?” The physician asked again, her brow furrowed in her deep concentration.

The imp nurse shrugged lightly as she hurried alongside the group of three, her presence now making it an entourage of four; “Barely. We’ve resorted to keeping quiet. Any attempt to talk to him has either caused him to grunt and heave, or at worst he becomes despondent and becomes aggressive. We’ve had to put a blindfold on him in case he turns one of us to stone during the process.”

Octavia covered her mouth with a nervously twitching hand, her eyes wide as specks of tears welled up in her eyes. It was traumatizing for her to hear that her father was becoming what couldn’t only be described as a ‘feral beast’ in need of containment. To make matters worse internally within her mind, Octavia couldn’t help but wonder if this was ‘the end’ for the owl prince she knew — a horrific end by the gripping claws of some dilapidating, incapacitating ailment which couldn’t even be identified.

Upon seeing Octavia become visibly despondent to the subject matter, the nurse incubus attempts to provide the owl princess with some solace; “It will be okay—”

“How?” Octavia snaps with a shaky voice; “H-How the hell can you say that? Didn’t you just hear what’s happening to dad??”

The nurse, quite understandably, didn’t know how to respond to this, his minuscule words of compassionately offered reassurance now proven to be futile.

Suddenly, the haunting sound of mournful and agonized wailing echoed from down the hall, haunting everyone who heard it; especially Octavia who yelped silently and began to choke as if she was about to weep. That sound, that awful wailing — it sounded so much like her father, yet so foreign and near animalistic, like the sound of a dying, writhing beast. The helplessness which the incredibly sickly prince’s daughter felt in that moment was tragically impossible to understate. As though it was a pitiful call to speed up, the entourage began to stride at a heightened pace, now to the point that all four parties were in a light jog! Octavia glares with deepest worry at the strong copper and ammonia-scented concoction on the trolley as it sloshes and swirled with movement, the inertia causing it to dance around within the cylindrical flask it was contained tightly within. Shorter and shorter the hallway got as the group sprinted ever closer to Stolas’ bedroom, the grunts

and wails of purely agonizing pain getting louder and more intense, approaching a near seven-foot hellhound who stood guard by the entrance.

“Go, go!” The physician ordered in a rush, ushering the nurse straight into the bedroom with her, along with their payload in tow!

Octavia nearly stumbles over as the two nurses and the lead physician barge through the doorway, her eyes widening with horror to see the state Stolas was now in, clasping her weakened hands over her mouth as she stared in anguish. The position which Stolas was in was beyond distressing — Where possible he was restrained, his arms, legs, and even his torso were held to the bed with thick leather straps, while all four of his eyes had been tightly veiled with a thick white cloth, rendering him completely blind. Adding insult to injury — a saying which rang far truer in this situation and beyond comfortable admittance — was the IV bag supplying water supplements which had since been attached to his left forearm, along with heart rate monitoring patches attached to his chest. His feathers too had become matted from his sickness, each and every one wiry and clumped together from the amount of sweat the owl prince perspired. In short, Stolas looked completely dilapidated, and was barely himself.

“Wha.. W—What—… Wuh—…” Octavia gasped through each shallow breath she took, finding herself paralyzed exactly where she stood as she choked hopelessly on her words.

“Gnnrrg… Rrrrgh… H-Hrrragh…” Stolas groaned and stirred mindlessly, his send of association with his surroundings evidently near nonexistent. To his daughter’s mental anguish, she couldn’t help but think that he sounded exactly like a critically wounded predatory animal, like a wildcat. It had been a full two hours since Octavia had last seen her, and within that span of feeble time, Stolas’ condition had gotten drastically more pitiful. Her own father, reduced to the likes of some mangy, rabid animal — a cruel reality which Octavia was forced to experience.

Even before Via knew it, like the inner machinations of an uncaring automaton, the two nurses and the succubus physician got to work.

“Guy. The IV bag, now,” the physician sternly ordered, reaching her hand towards the incubus with an open palm, more than ready to receive the plastic bag full of blood.

In barely a heartbeat, the bag is transferred into the succubus’ professional hands, her arms and wrists articulating with near flawless precision, wasting no time at all to insert the needle into Stolas’ arm once the bag itself had been suspended from its stand. A corpulent bead of sweat accumulated upon the succubus’ brow as she cautiously inserted the needle into the prince’s arm,

luckily finding success in doing so as her patient barely flinched in reaction to the sting. Management of the newly set-up IV bag was handed to the incubus nurse as the physician turned her attention back to the medicinal trolley, reaching for the large vial which stank of a potent chemical odor. Before she could do anything else, the succubus physician heard Stolas mumbling yet again, though this time it sounded directed at someone — to her.

"Vos… Vos descedite me…" The prince's voice was shallow and raspy, almost desperate for air and the strength to form syllables, the remaining strength he had quickly being exhausted once again as he finished his plea.

A mildly confused look washed over the physician's face as she heard those restricted words, trying to discern what exactly her patient was trying to convey to her. This was to no avail, however, as the "gibberish" he spoke in sounded completely alien to her, and neither did the nurses present recognize it. One person, however, did recognize it, and no less to her alarm — Octavia. Though nowadays such an occurrence was rare, in times when certain severe illnesses plagued a goetia, there tends to be an external and internal transition in both appearance and behavior. Of the many telltale signs of illness, such as matted feathers, profuse sweating, and the likes, one of the far more concerning indications of circumstances becoming dire was the emergence of speaking Latin. While it wasn't unusual or accusatory for a member of this royal house to speak the language, though in recent times an increasingly rare occurrence, when in times of severe erraticism caused by illness, the involuntary usage of Latin tended to indicate one thing — the emergence of erratic aggression.

Stolas groaned once more, though his voice was louder as though he had another morsel of strength to speak; "...R-Recede a me… R-Rec—Recede… a-a me.."

As per the imp nurse's earlier warning, everyone present chose to stay as quiet as possible, the succubus physician silently working away as she prepared the container of medicinal payload for distribution. With a careful eye for precise detail, the physician inserts the business end of a small needle into the chemical compound, pulling the small metallic plunger upward to suck up a sufficient dosage. Octavia watched what was unfolding with grim anxiety, having since become hyper aware of everything, from the incoherent mumbling from Stolas, to the light metallic "clinking" when the physician flicked the syringe to remove any excess.

The sound of the leather straps being pulled from Stolas' light resistance broke the dead silence which had settled, causing Octavia to hyperfixate on her father with a light gasp!

Stolas rekindled his effort of stirring weakly against his restraints, gasping out feebly; "Recede a me… V-Vestra me quaerit … i-interficere…"

“Y-You’re going to be just fine,” the succubus attempted to reassure her patiently silently; “Just hang on for me, okay? You’ll be okay.”

Her cautious optimism, however, wouldn’t be paid off too kindly. Diverting the succubus’ attention away from the syringe in her hands was the heart rate monitor by Stolas’ bedside, its ‘beeps’ beginning to fluctuate to a higher rate, indicating loud and clear that the prince’s heartbeat had increased significantly. Alarmingly enough, the electronic pulses only grew faster.

“Beep… Beep... Beep.. Beep. Beep. Beep—Beep—Beep—“

“Me—nngh… s-solum relinquatis… d-disedite…!”

“Uhh.. M-Miss Bethany?” The incubus nurse worryingly asked the physician, pointing his finger to another worrying display on the screen. In tandem with the increasing pulse rate, the beats per minute, too, had increased exponentially, and continued to rise.

80… 85… 91… 93… ***105… <u>122…</u>***

“Wh-What should we do?” The imp nurse asks cautiously, her eyes darting indecisively between Stolas and the physician; “Should we sedate him?”

“No, hold off for now,” the increasingly nervous physician told her assistant, a head of sweat accumulating atop her brow; “Just be alert for when we start the treatment.” While multitasking with the syringe in her left hand, ‘Miss Bethany’ uses her free right hand to hand her assistant a second spare IV bag of fluid; “Here, put this on standby in case we need it.”

“R-Right,” the compliant imp whispered from just under her breath, observing Stolas’ current state with utmost caution in what was essentially fear for her life.

Her small gloved red hands trembled with anxiousness as she hung the spare IV bag up on a spare stand, making sure with absolute certainty that the medicinal payload was fastened tight where it was suspended. At least for the time being, it seemed as though everything was perfectly still, waiting for the physician’s calculated signal to begin Sloth’s novel and experimental medical

procedure. After much anticipation, the physician nodded quietly to both of her assistants, to which both returned the gesture in unison, all of them of the sober consensus that they were finally ready.

Stagnation plagued the physician's mind as she glanced between the syringe in her hand, and the shaved spot in Stolas' forearm which was the designated injection site. Finally 'Miss Bethany' exhales and works up the courage to act, sounding off quietly; "Alright, stand by…"

Octavia watched the doctor's skilled and calculated hand inch the needle closer to her father's arm, her breaths shallow and restricted with the extreme tension she felt. Then, after what felt like an eternity cramped into no more than a few measly seconds, the medicinal concoction is injected into Stolas' bloodstream, with strangely no reaction from the prince, barely even a flinch—

"BEEP—BEEP—BEEP—BEEP—BEE—"

Everyone present goes into shock at the sound of the heart rate monitor going berserk! 'Miss Bethany's' eyes locked onto the screen to find that it wasn't, in fact, the sound of her patient's heart rate becoming out of control, but instead a message — "ERROR: POWER OVERLOAD", it read in flashing red letters. Something was going wrong with the system, but in a way which she hadn't seen before; "W-What the hell?"

The incubus nurse's reaction was much the same, staring in bewilderment at the malfunctioning device; "Wait, what— what's happening? What is this??"

"I-I don't know…" the physician gasped with a trailing off voice, her mouth agape with pure confused astonishment.

"Oh no… no-no-no…" Octavia gasped, clasping her hand over her mouth — the fear in her eyes told everyone that the owlet knew what this meant; "…Get away from him! Now!!"

'Miss Bethany' finally turned her eyes towards Octavia, just as wildly confused and tense; "W-What?"

"GET AWAY FROM HIM!!"

“<u>DISCEDITE A FILIA MEA!!!</u>”

Stolas let out a monstrous otherworldly roar which echoed hauntingly throughout the palace, deafening everyone within his bedroom! A surge of emerging strength coursed through his body, utilizing it by violently thrashing once more against the leather straps across his body, all the while a viscous crimson glow seeped from the space underneath the blindfold! The owl prince’s bed clattered and shook violently, scraping against the floor as he continued bellowing his eldritch screams!

He howls barbarously; **“DESINE MEAM FILIAM SOLAM, TAMEN BESTIAE!! EGO OCCIDAM OMNES VOS!! OMNES VOS IN VESTRO SANGUINE MERGITE!!”**

Barging through the doors and slamming them wide open was the hellhound, observing to his horror the scene playing before him! That’s when he gives the order, pointing sharply at Octavia; “She needs to get out of here, NOW!”

“W-WHAT?!” Octavia exclaimed in disbelief, snapping her head towards the towering guard.

“Your presence is making things worse, he can sense you!” The hellhound exclaimed with a booming voice, grabbing the owl princess firmly on the shoulder; “You need to get out!”

Octavia yelps from the sudden pressure around her right arm, promptly trying to pry his tight grip off her to no avail; “NO! No, I’m not leaving him!! NGAH— L-Let go of me!!”

Further and further Octavia is dragged out of her father’s bedroom, watching through pained and tearful eyes as Stolas kept writhing and wailing within the bed he was strapped to, still dishing out threats to everyone present in that alien language of his.

“GET OFF ME!! LET ME GO!!” Octavia kept screaming.

Finally the hellhound manages to drag a kicking and screaming Octavia out of the room, outstretching one hand to shut the door between her and Stolas.

“OMNES PERIBUNT!! OMNES PERIBUNT!!”

“DON’T KILL HIM, PLEASE!!”

SLAM!!!

Loona felt her left hand along the musky, filthy walls as she slowly staggered blindly through the apparent hallway she now found herself in, not a trace of light to be found for who knows how long for. Though Loona could make out minimal shapes within the overbearing darkness, it wasn’t enough to make easy unobscured navigation a certainty. As the hellhound trudged sluggishly through the darkness, the sound of gunfire from somewhere in the far distance continued to ring out hauntingly.

Bang! ... Crak–Crak–Crak! ... Bang-Bang! ... Bam! ... Crak!

With a grunt of frustration and pain from the slaps she had endured, Loona continued onwards, the palm of her hand desperately patting the walls for… something. A lightswitch? A torch? A lamp?? Anything, really, to make navigation that much easier! Where exactly was she, anyway? What part of the mining camp was she in? Judging from the cold, hard feeling of the wall which felt to be made of brick, she must’ve been in a significant part of the site — after all, Malloy did say she had a “front-row seat”. But why dump her in some dark, dingy room? Was he going to torture her to death? It didn’t matter anyhow; she was now free, and she was going to commit to what she set out to do!

Suddenly Loona’s hand brushed against something in the wall, causing her to lightly gasp — an indentation, and one which felt to have been deliberately built into the brick structure. If anything, it seemed to be a shelf of sorts. With a newfound sense of hope, Loona felt her hand into the indentation, her hand coming into contact with something roughly cylindrical in profile and made of metal. To her great relief, the hellhound was quick to realize what it was — a lantern! Without hesitation, Loona snatched up the lantern and shook it, discovering that it still contained sufficient kerosene. Adding to her stroke of luck was what she found when she reached back into the indentation — a box of matches, half full!

“Oh thank God!” Loona found herself celebrating, catching her off-guard; *Thank who now?*

Regardless, she was quick to grab one of the matches and struck a light, the small orange glow lighting up, breaking through the pitch blackness! Though the light was so incredibly small, Loona was able to see her hand once again after much yearning to do so, wasting no time to light up the kerosene lamp which she was quick to cherish so dearly. Soon as the lit match made contact with the wick, a warm orange light embraced Loona in its warm illumination, liberating her from the darkness which was so overwhelmingly engulfing. After allowing her eyes to adjust to the newfound light surrounding her from the lantern, Loona found that she was indeed in a hallway, one which had four open doorways, two for each side of the hallway. Behind her a good fifteen feet away was the door to the room she had just escaped, and standing before her at the other end of the hallway another good ten feet was a filthy wooden staircase leading upwards.

Now Loona had a choice; should she advance up the staircase and set out on her task, or investigate the rooms trailing off to her immediate left and right? After much stagnation, the hellhound chose to do the latter. She was still yet to find her rifle which was being kept who-knows-where, leaving her practically defenseless, counting out her agility and strength which might not be of much use this time.

Loona raised the lamp in front of her to light up the way, choosing to venture through the first doorway to the left. The warm orange light of the lamp illuminates the small room full of old timber shelving, washing over the entire space and casting long shadows over the walls. What Loona had just invited herself into was a storage room, which by the looks of things was mostly barren, except for a few half-empty bottles of kerosene and a near empty can of what seemed to be rat poison — at least judging from the extremely faded labeling wrapped around the rusty tin container. A thorough search of the room commenced, with Loona scanning around the mostly empty shelves for anything of value… nothing.

“Dammit…” Loona cussed under her breath, promptly marching outside and across the hallway to the second room.

This second room was slightly different; while there were shelves like in the last room Loona visited, there too was a line of three steel storage cabinets, patches of rust visible and showing other obvious signs of their advanced age. Unlike the last room, however, this one seemed to have more on the shelves, and things which had value; a set of matches, a few small boxes of small-arms ammunition of varying cartridge sizes, two machetes still holstered in their black leather sheaths, just to name a few. Another flicker of hope prompted Loona to spin around and begin searching through the steel cabinets, at first swinging open the leftmost cabinet to find nothing. A further search into the middle cabinet proved more fruitful; upon flinging the doors wide open, Loona finally found her rifle, hanging neatly barrel-up in a vertical gun rack.

The hellhound let out an exasperated sigh of relief, quickly grabbing her cherished rifle and preparing herself to load in a round. Loona placed the still glowing lantern on one of the shelves to free her hands for reloading, using one hand to grab the weapon by its stock and her other to open

the chamber. At first the bolt felt stiff, but with a coaxing tug, Loona was able to pull the bolt back with a metallic “Ca-Chunk!” Upon looking into the chamber, she was surprised to find that there were still three rounds left in the chamber, silently waiting to be fired. This of course left room for another round to be loaded in, the round in question being the blessed bullet which Loona carefully slotted into its designated spot, the faintly silver-glowing round slotting in like soft butter as if it belonged. With four rounds in the chamber, the hellhound slid the bolt back into position.

Ch-Chik!

“Okay… O-Okay,” Loona whispered to herself as she took a few slow and deep breaths, calming her nerves. After a few seconds of cautious silence, she said to herself; “I think I’m ready. I’m… Yeah… I-I’m ready. Huff!… I’m ready.”

With one more coarse huff of “now or never”, Loona grabs the kerosene lantern in one hand and starts leaving the impossibly dark storage room with no intent to stop! Loona’s footfall echoed as she flitted through the open doorway, before making a hard right towards the staircase without…

…stopping.

Loona froze in place as she stared wide-eyed at the girl standing on the very bottom step. She was of shorter stature, perhaps just under six foot, her hair a sweetly brunette which reflected the orange light of Loona’s outstretched lantern. What was more was that she wore a pair of faded gray sneakers, a pair of long black pants… and a yellow shirt. Her face was blank as she stared with ‘dead’ eyes at the stunned hellhound, almost emotionless and indifferent to the presence of the six-foot, humanoid-wolf being she stood before. Loona tried her hardest to find her words to no avail, trying her hardest to figure out whether or not this ‘girl’ was legitimate, or another one of Malloy’s mirages — regardless, she was ready to fight for her life, and that fight-or-flight feeling was intense.

Eventually the girl illuminated by Loona’s light source finally moves, pivoting herself to look back up the stairs at something, before returning to stare at the hellhound.

Finally, this mysterious girl says in a hushed tone, so faint and delicately; “Hide.”

Suddenly the little girl flees up the stairs, vanishing out of the range of the lantern in a flash! Loona attempts to call out to the girl, only to be stopped by a noise — the sound of the top step creaking

under someone's weight. In a near instant, Loona knew it wasn't the girl, for it sounded too heavy to be so; this was a hostile presence.

She had to hide!

Doing good by the girl's advice, Loona swiftly retreats into one of the dark rooms and quickly snuffs out her lantern! Using the butt-end of her rifle, the hellhound crouches down and watches eagerly for the newcomer to pass by the doorway, hoping beyond hope that the pitch darkness would be enough to hide her! The wait was long and nerve-racking, each step creaking loudly under the new arrival's wait as he descended.

Crrrk! … Crreeek! … Crrk! … Crrrak! … <u>Thud!</u>

The sound of the newcomer's boots coming into contact with the cold and unforgiving floor echoed through the walls, with the sound of advancing footsteps following suit as this novel presence trudged down the hallway. Accompanying this sound was the bright shine of a torch beaming down the hallway, towards the room where Loona had just escaped from.

Thud.. Thud.. Thud.. Thud.. Thud..

As the figure stomped closer and closer past the doorway of Loona's highly-improvised hiding spot, she could hear the newcomer's breaths, taking note of just how muffled and labored they sounded. It was as though he was trying to breathe, though his attempt of inhaling much needed oxygen was undermined by his evidently failed lungs, letting out muffled wheezes and hisses. After much anticipation, the figure finally comes into full view for Loona to see, causing her to hold her breath! The figure was tall, around Loona's own height, but he was bulky, broad shouldered, and dressed in a long, dark coat and trousers; his face, too, seemed to be cloaked in what appeared to be a sack, two makeshift eye holes helping him find his way. Luckily for Loona's hide and a testament to her hiding skills, the figure didn't notice her and continued to stagger past the doorway, and onwards towards the room at the end of the hallway, preparing to do God-knows-what to its former occupant. Utilizing her exceptional hearing, Loona waited until the imposing beast of a man froze at the very far end of the hallway, the sound of his heavy footsteps finally ceasing.

Now was her chance to act, albeit carefully and quietly…

Using the cover of the loud creaking hinges as the figure evidently pushed the old wooden door wide open, Loona stood back up and crept back towards the doorway, still utilizing the cover of

darkness to peek around the corner and peer cautiously at the figure. She caught just a glimpse of him as the door swung shut behind him, clattering noisily against the doorframe! … Then Loona heard the electronic "beep!" of a two-way radio, followed by the man's croaky, muffled voice from behind the door, just loud enough to hear what he was saying.

"You said she'd be here. Where is she? … Yes, I'm in the room now. … No, she's gone. I mean she's gone! She's up and left, Vick! … Oh piss off, no I'm not bullshitting you!"

Now was Loona's chance! With a nimble but quiet spring in her step, the hellhound ran out of the room and up the stairs, each step loudly groaning underneath her weight! On the top of the steps was a second door which had been left slightly ajar, the glow of lightbulbs beyond the door beckoning for Loona to come break free from the enveloping darkness! At last, proper light!

The hellhound runs faster and faster up the stairs, finally reaching the door and slamming it wide open as she finally breaks free of that terrible and dark corridor! Loona had no time to relax, however, as she spun around and saw the figure running up the stairs after her, his arms pumping with a machete clasped in his right monstrous hand! Just before he could reach her, Loona slammed the door right in his face and barricaded it with a nearby chair, rendering the hellhound's would-be murderer trapped in a pitch-dark glorified sarcophagus!

BOOM! THOOM! BOOM—THOOM—THOOM!!!

Like a cast-iron gate blocking the way of a ferocious demon, the man began pounding hard against the door, desperate to get out! Loona, of course, left him in the dark and sprinted away as fast as she could, her rifle at the ready and prepared to fire! The hellhound now found herself striding through wide open rooms with large vertical support beams, causing her to come to the conclusion that she was within the dreaded walls of the 'powerhouse'!

CLAK-CLAK-CLAK-CLAK-CLAK-CLAK!

Like the beat of a million drums, Loona's sharp nails clacked against the floor as she made thunderous strides towards the gunfight, the sound of exchanging fire getting louder and louder, echoing tremendously through the masonry and brickwork! Then, off into the fast approaching distance, Loona could see bright flickers of gunfire, firing out past what appeared to be windows!

BANG-BANG! BAM! CRAK-CRAK-CRAK!!

Loona's eyes began to grow brightly with fury as she began snarling, her rifle drawn and with bayonet fixed, she charged with great force towards her first target; a bearded man dressed in nothing but boots, long pants, and a white singlet who had noticed her too late! With a deafening war cry, Loona plunges the bayonet into the gunman's side, causing him to wail out in agonizing pain as he falls hard to the floor, splitting his head wide open as his skull makes contact — dead!

Then came Loona's second armed challenger charging towards her with confidence; a younger man in a flannel shirt and a shaved head! The hellhound wasted no time at all in giving him what he asked for, narrowly dodging his rifle shot before slashing his throat! A few short seconds of gargles and blood-soaked scream of agony later, and at last he fell to the floor in a pool of his own viscera — dead!

"WHO'S NEXT, HUH?!" Loona screams through the building, rifle aimed wherever she looked; "ANYONE ELSE WANNA DIE?! COME ON, FIGHT ME YOU SONS OF BITCHES!!"

Suddenly a familiar voice calls out from outside, somewhere in the darkness of the night; "Loona?! Loona mate, is that you in there?!"

It was Jim, luckily still alive and kicking!

Though she felt temporary relief in that moment with the sound of Jim's voice, Loona didn't relax one bit, instead calling out; "YEAH, IT'S ME! GET YOUR ASSES IN HERE AND HELP ME FIGHT!!"

An Hour Remains…

Pandemonium - V

Like a wildcat tracking down its prey in a relentless pursuit, Loona resumed sprinting and weaving through the wide-open space, turning into a lightning-quick blur of white, dark gray, and silver! A look of intense anger in Loona's eyes gave loud and clear testament to the "fire and brimstone" she was going to dish out to anyone she came across whom she deemed as hostile, her blood-soaked banner leading her unstoppable charge! The echoing voices of men bellowing out incoherent words of confusion and panic grew louder and louder as the hellhound drew ever closer, leaving a trailing vibrant echo of her pounding footsteps in her wake!

Loona had them scared and disoriented, and she had all the intention to take advantage of that!

"It's coming down this way!" A scraggly and raspy male voice screamed violently!

"What the hell is it?!" Another younger-sounding man cried desperately, fear compelling his voice to shake with adrenaline!

"Fuck if I know! Who cares?!" The raspy male voice replied boomingly; "Just make sure to shoot the cunt dead!"

A wide, sharp-toothed grin spreads widely across Loona's muzzle as she bares her teeth, huffing with adrenaline and determination to keep sprinting! The overhead lights shot past overhead as she continued running, getting closer and closer to yet another doorway leading into another section of this vast industrial brick building. Just before Loona could get close enough to the fast approaching doorway, suddenly appearing from the left armed with a haphazardly aimed semi-automatic rifle was another gunman!

CRAK—CRAK—CRAK!!

Barely escaping by the skin on her teeth, Loona throws herself sharply to the left and ducks for cover behind the adjacent wall! A stray bullet whizzed dangerously close past her tail as she somersaulted for cover, the fur being rustled and faintly singed by the careening projectile — far too close for Loona's comfort! She grabs her tail and hastily checks it for any injuries, finding to her relief that there were none, bar from a slight singed indentation in her fur. Quickly Loona recooperates herself, pointing the business end towards the doorway as three more bullets swept past at breakneck speed!

CRAK—CRAK—CRAK!!

After those thrice more loosely-aimed shots, the deafening, oppressive echo of gunfire finally died down, the pair of gunmen on the other side of Loona's temporary cover waiting for her to make a move. There was a fragile stillness in the air as the hellhound breathed deeply, the only prominent sounds being the faint sound of rain tumbling down outside, along with the sound of gunfire from the floor above and distant muffled yelling voices.

~Tak-tak-tak-tak~ — A few spent bullet casings were thrown like pebbles through the doorway, an obvious attempt from the two gunmen on the other side to coax Loona from her hiding spot, prompting the hellhound in question to roll her eyes in disbelief.

What did they think she was, some kind of dumb animal? Alright, that's fine. Two could play that game…

Loona scans the room around her, finding a nearby piece of damp and ragged cloth which could act as a decoy for the briskly-crafted plan she was about to pull off. She hurriedly picked it from the ground, shuddering with disgust as it felt damp and grimy to the touch, and draped it over her rifle's bloodied bayonet for use as a pole. Averting her eyes back towards the doorway no more than half-a-foot away from her, Loona sticks out the cloth into the entrance way and hopes for a reaction — which, like perfect intricate clockwork, came as expected!

CRAK—CRAK—<u>PING!!!</u> — An empty magazine!

Who's the dumb animal now, huh?

With a ferocious growl, Loona careens through the doorway with great agility! Immediately she hones in on her target and plunges her jaws into the reloading gunman's neck, who bawls out in unbelievably excruciating pain! To add insult to literal injury, the hellhound used her sheer jaw-strength to fling her bleeding-out victim into his accomplice, sending them both crashing violently to the ground! Now covered in his now dead accomplice's blood and viscera, and pinned down by his corpse, the second would-be attacker grunts and writhes, glaring at Loona with a look of intense fear in his big brown eyes! Loona rightly took no pity on him, promptly grabbing the handgun which had fallen out of his hands from the whiplash-inducing fall, and—

BANG!!!

The hellhound's rampage continued.

"Jesus Christ, that thing's already here!!"

Another voice bellows from further down this second massive room, the scampering of multiple sets of footsteps echoing like an avalanche! Loona flittingly fished another round out of her pocket and loaded it into her rifle, slamming the bolt shut with a loud, reverberating "***Ch-Chik***"! — A fully loaded magazine, primed and ready at the hellhound's disposal. A gruff exhale escaped Loona's lips as she began running once again, not having to sprint too far to meet her next group of ragtag assailants; this time, however, they had cover. Standing between Loona and this group of thugs she had come across was a network of stationary machinery and pipes, a large boiler spanning the width of the room effectively the center-stage of this continuous battle.

As the pursuing hellhound crouched behind the abundance of dilapidated pipes and industrial machinery, even more aggressive yelling came from the men tasked with hunting her down:

"Where is it, Nige?! Can you see it?!"

"It's behind the boiler, on the other side!"

"Get a shot at it, then!"

"I can't, the bloody pipework's in the way!!"

"KILL THE SON OF A BITCH, NIGE! IT GOT JOHNNO!!"

RAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT-TAT!!

"NGAH, shit!!" Loona flinched while cursing, crouching further down as a sudden hail of gunfire burst over her head, ricocheting off the rusted metal and spinning off in all sorts of directions!

Flakes of flying rust glinted under the overhanging lights which swung aimlessly from the inertia caused by the torrential pour-down of bullets, one particular stray ricocheting shot embedding itself dangerously close into the ground, directly in front of Loona! One particular member of the pursuing tag team felt brave enough to advance towards her, his hard-falling boot steps coming from Loona's right flank, getting closer and closer until at last revealing himself to her after clearing the mess of pipe and boiler-work! Luckily for Loona, she was ready for his arrival, aiming the rifle right between his eyes with flawless precision and pulling the trigger:

BAM!!!

A fine mist of brain matter and gore splattered through the back of the attacker's head, sending his head tilting violently backwards as his lifeless body collapsed to the floor!

THWUMP!!

"SEAMUS!!" A voice called from the other side, the sound of a rifle bolt sliding accompanying the shocked cry of mourning.

Loona stood right back up on her feet but kept her head low as she swiftly advanced, dodging yet another pot shot which skimmed dangerously past her left ear, causing it to flinch! Ducking and weaving past all sorts of rusted pipes and debris from years of neglect, Loona at last reached an ending point of the massive boiler, stopping just short of clearing it where she knew her hunters were. Another short burst of bullets prematurely flew past in front of Loona, the two remaining trigger-happy gunmen careless with the timing of their precious shots. Now at a decision making 'dead-end', Loona began frantically scanning the space around her for anything which might help her make a breakthrough, all the while more deafening shots cut through the air above!

When it started to seem near hopeless, that's when she found it — a spot in the ceiling roughly above the pair, a loose beam of steel which threatened to snap off at any moment! After loading another round into the chamber for good measure, Loona aims the rifle up to a particular visible weak-spot in the steel girder and fires!

BAM!! — CHING!!

Coaxed by Loona's perfectly aimed shot, the girder snaps off the remnants of its bolted overhead supports, sending it swinging right into the pathway of the two bunched-together armed thugs!

"JESUS CH—"

CLANG!!!

At last, a breakthrough! The hellhound with fire and fury burning in her eyes charges out of her cover with her rifle drawn, bayonet and all, finding her two would-be killers gruesomely crushed by the massive steel beam. If the crush or the blood-loss hadn't killed them, the onset of tetanus absolutely would've. However there was no time to stop and "admire" the carnage, and Loona knew this. The sheer lack of time to lose motivated her to press on, breaking out into yet another unstoppable dash through the fifteen-foot-wide doorway into the third and final chamber of the ground floor! Upon charging right on through to the next room, it seemed as though it was devoid of anyone to fight which came to Loona with great relief, a moment of temporary respite—

~Shuffle~

"Wh—HURKK!!"

Suddenly a tightness chokes Loona's neck as a jacket-clad arm wraps around it, forcing her to drop the 'Gewehr 98' within her clutches! Immediately she uses both her hands to grab and claw at the choke-holding arm, desperately trying to free herself from the sheer strength of the unseen ambusher! Loona gasped greedily for air and writhed like a stabbed rat caught in barbed wire, kicking and dragging her feet until she began to feel herself weaken in strength! As the hellhound's desperate writhing and kicks got ever weaker, so did her equally as desperate gasps for air, her vision starting to become blurry and unfocused with every passing seco—

BANG!!! — SPLAT!!!

THUMP!!

"Gah—!!" The heavily restricting arm falls away dramatically from Loona's neck, allowing her to breathe freely! She gasps for air and feels her neck which ached from the intense pressure which had now dramatically receded, beyond thankful for whoever had… freed her.

Upon turning to the left where the ‘saving grace’ shot had come from, the hellhound came face to face with her savior. Standing no more than ten feet away from Loona was Vasily Antonov, his longarm rifle still aimed where his target stood only seconds ago, and a black prayer rope clasped around the hand which he held the forestock with. His coat was peppered with the rain which had pelted him before he ventured into this brick-built hell, the dampness glistening under the periodically flickering overhead light between himself and Loona. In his dark blue eyes was a look of tension and unwavering focus, his pupils locked onto the woman he had just saved. But he didn’t look inviting towards Loona, no.

He looked angry. Intensely angry.

Just before Loona could say anything, she was promptly shut up when Vasily readjusted his aim to point directly at her, right between her scarlet-red eyes. With a hand which shook with adrenaline and anger, he pulls the bolt back which ejects the spent casing, before pulling it forwards again which chambered another round; this one especially for Loona.

Then he states, loud and clear, as the distant roll of thunder rumbles from outside; “Ah. That makes sense. … Yes, it all makes sense now.”

Loona froze right where she stood, standing alert and upright and daring not to do anything which would result in her being fatally shot. Instead, she simply let out a hesitant, stunned, and confused; “Wh…What?”

Another low growl of thunder came from somewhere distant as the rain continued to fall, clattering against the exterior brickwork, all the while Loona and Vasily stood there in an intense one-sided standoff. Eventually Vasily shatters the silence in his low, growling voice, asking plainly; “What are you?”

Loona wasn’t able to speak, being at a complete loss for words. She knew that he was going to find out sooner or later, but why now? Why in the middle of a literal life-or-death situation? In her attempt to choke out an answer to the millions of questions the Russian had to be asking himself in that moment, Loona’s mouth silently gaped, flapping open and close like a fish out of water. Before too long, the hellhound managed to stammer out; “I’m… I-I’m a—”

“A Hellhound,” Vasily flatly interrupts, already knowing the answer; “…Am I right?”

Loona wasn't sure of how to respond.

Antonov's patience had long since worn thin, repeating himself in a more demanding and aggressive tone; "Am I right or not?!"

"Y-Yes!" Loona forced herself to speak; "Yeah, I.. I am." In an odd sense, she felt vaguely ashamed for admitting it, though she didn't exactly know why this was.

If the cornered hellhound had hoped that her response would dampen the tension between herself and the middle-aged Russian, then she was hoping in vain. The look in Vasily's eyes only grew angrier and more hostile than Loona had ever seen from him before, sneering as he uttered something scornful in his native language. Vasily advanced a foot forward, his longarm still aimed square between the 'beast's' eyes, his advancement prompting Loona to flinch and take a slow step back in tandem.

Vasily spoke again, his tone intense and contemptuous; "You foul thing… You foul, disgusting thing! How dare you... How DARE you deceive me! You will not be my demise, beast!! My Faith is stronger than you, do you understand me?!"

Once more, Loona was at a loss for words, her eyes wide and her demeanor sober, obviously understanding the gravity of the situation.

"It makes sense now! You've brought me here to perish!!" Vasily boomed; "You've deceived me with the intention of dragging me to hell along with you! That will not happen, you wicked servant of Satan!! Do you hear me?!"

This was enough to snap Loona out of her state of verbal stagnation; "No-no-no, wait a second! I don't want to kill you, I promise! I just—"

"Then why do you appear to me, you profane beast?!"

"BECAUSE I NEED YOUR HELP, GODDAMMIT!!"

Loona's voice echoed like the roar of the approaching thunder outside, reverberating through the walls with great acoustical influence. Her voice sounded full of emotional genuineness, making her point as clear and concise to an utmost heartfelt degree. There was no hint of malice or deception within Loona's confession, and in an odd sense Vasily seemed to know it, displaying a hint of such knowing through the attentive and stern look in his eyes which seemed to faintly soften.

Loona continued; "I know, I get where you're coming from! I'm a Hellhound, and I shouldn't be trusted! I get that, okay?! But please, just… agh!—J-just don't shoot me, hear me out!"

Vasily remained quiet. He remained stern and visibly hostile, but attentive, his rifle still aimed and poised to fire at a mere second's notice. For the briefest of nanoseconds, Vasily's unsettling eyes darted around for a check of their surroundings, making sure the coast was clear before finally drawing his pupils back to Loona. He says coldly; "You have a minute. Don't you dare tell me lies, for I know your tricks."

"I'm not lying!" Loona cried out in digression, before continuing with the utmost of her desperate sincerity; "I get it, okay?! You don't trust me; not that you did in the first place, but now you don't trust me even more now that you've seen what I really am! I-I wouldn't trust me either! You're not going to believe me, and you probably never will.. b-but I've been getting… 'visons', I guess you can call them??"

Vasily inched towards with his longarm drawn by another foot, the business end of the weapon even closer; "Oh I'm sure you demons have many visions. Deceptive ones at that, ones which even you deceive yourselves with!"

Loona gave Vasily a look of being mildly insulted; "Well maybe I do! Hell, I probably deceive myself all the time! B-But these ones are different, they're like 'divine interventions' almost!"

"Oh, you LYING, BLASPHEMOUS DOG!!" Vasily boomed furiously, causing Loona to jump in fright; "HOW DARE YOU UTTER THOSE PROFANE CLAIMS!! HOW DARE YOU LIE?! Help from above would never be bestowed upon you, do not play me like a fool!"

"I SWEAR I'M NOT LYING!! I'M JUST AS CONFUSED ABOUT ALL THIS AS YOU!!" Loona exclaimed, raising her hands in a deescalating gesture, though her voice didn't reflect this; "You may not believe me, but that's what's been happening! Nearly every night or whenever I'm sleeping, they came to me and told me more about this thing we're up against! Goddammit, I explained this to you back at the hotel, a-about your great-grandfather! H-He told me about y—Ah!"

Loona yelps at the feeling of cold steel pressed against her face, convincing Loona very emphatically to cease talking. Vasily had marched up and now had his rifle pressed into her muzzle at point blank range, his dark blue eyes burning scornfully into the hellhound's own petrified set of pupils!

"You tread very dangerous ground!" Vasily hissed with his face wrinkled and flushed red with a deep anger; "Why do they come to you, these visions and this information?!"

"I DON'T KNOW!!" Loona cries with sheer honesty; "I really don't, and I don't know what they see in me! All I know is that I— WE need to finish Malloy off! He's made deals with Lucifer and everything, and if we don't stop him, then we all die here tonight! Please, I am begging you! I NEED your help here! You're the only one who can help us right now! I-If you can't do it for me, can you at least do it for Jim?!"

Intensifying rain and thunder continued to grow outside as the room fell dead silent, with Vasily's response nowhere to be heard. The Russian had taken to staying eerily silent, long arching shadows stroked across his face which heavily pronounced the deep wrinkles stretching across his weary face. It was at that moment when Loona realized something amidst the sheer oppressive tension she felt; this must be what the '**Fear of God**' feels like, or at least the 'Fear of The Righteous'; both of them equally as powerful forces to be reckoned with. Loona held her breath, hoping for the best but preparing for the worst…

"…Hm. Ty ochen' strannyy…"

…But the worst never came.

In a move of what had to be some form or another of a miracle, Vasily's rifle muzzle drew back from Loona's face, the pressure of the cold steel finally being lifted. The tension between hellhound and human, however, was not yet over, as Vasily stood imposing in front of her, his fist clenched around his rifle in his left hand and a jabbing finger with his right.

The Russian then asserts with an authority which Loona was forced by circumstance to accept; "Alright… Now. You listen to me very closely, woman, and pay attention." Vasily turns his sharply pointed finger to his chest, his voice still low and growling more than it usually was; "Do you understand what I am? I am a man of Faith. I always have been, and I always will be. Nothing will

shake my Faith, no matter what anyone does. I, myself, am a Christian. Do you understand what that means?"

Loona nodded rigidly.

"Vam sleduyet… You best understand that I will not tolerate any attempt at deception from you, or from any foreboding power. I am not afraid of you, you hear me? That is my conviction, and I will keep it until my time comes. If you try anything with me, then my rifle will do the talking. Is that understood?"

Once more, Loona nods quietly, stifling herself to remain so and compliant despite the clear threat made to her life. Loona had been especially very resentful of opposition for the past two weeks, so staying calm and collected after Vasily's hard words was in all actuality a personal feat for her — one which she felt oddly proud over.

Despite Loona's straightforward answers to each of his questions, Vasily initially didn't show any signs of relenting from his dead-cold piercing glare, a chill running down Loona's spine the more she gazed into it. Then, after what felt like an eternal standoff, Vasily slowly nodded his head, seeming to be cautiously satisfied with the hellhound's peculiarly compliant answers. Just as everything seemed still, the sound of jogging footsteps against the drenched ground outside quickly approached a wide-open doorway which led outside. In an instant, Loona immediately prepared herself to fight once again, preparing herself to pounce until the culprit made himself known.

"Hello?! You in there, Loona??" It was Jim.

Loona let out a short sigh of relief, before beckoning; "Yeah! Yeah, I'm in here!"

Stepping into the room to greet the two alive occupants was Jim, his oilskin coat and flat cap peppered with droplets and the lower-half of his boots caked in a drenched mixture of mud and gravel. Grasped firmly in his hands was his Lee Enfield which too was dripping with rain. Upon noticing that Loona had revealed her true form to Vasily, he shook his head disbelievingly and grimaced; "Oh Christ alive, Loona… So he knows now, huh?"

"Huff— Yep…" Loona huffs heavily with defeat, only now finally coming to terms that the secret was up.

Jim bows his head towards the floor to think to himself, scratching his nose for a second and looking back up; “So what now, does this change anything?”

Vasily who was still intently analyzing Loona slowly pivoted his head towards the fellow human being, making a slow step towards him with a slight change in demeanor. The Russian asks bluntly; “Now what exactly is your idea associating with such beings, sir?”

“No-no, Vasily, mate, just listen. Alright yeah, it does look bad, don’t it?” Jim was open to admit, to Loona’s own reluctant agreement; “I promise you though, like, she doesn’t mean any ill will, you know?

The Russian squints in heavy scrutiny to the young man’s claim; “How can you be so sure? Don't you know what she is??”

Jim continued to vouch for Loona regardless; “That’s the thing, I do know what she is! Look, it’s a long story, but honest to God, nothing shady has gone down for her to be here; no black magic or ritual shit, or anything. It’s unbelievable, but she’s the reason why I’m still alive! Just… Vasily, please, give her a chance to show that she isn’t as bad as all that! She’s an outlier!”

Vasily’s already squinted eyes only narrowed further, the intensified wrinkles on his face making his skin appear as though it was made of chipped stone. He mutters thoughtfully, albeit still very suspicious as he turns to glare at Loona once again; “Posmotrim…”

In turn, Loona stares back. As much as this man of stalwart Christian Faith was suspicious of her, the hellhound was equally, if not more untrusting of him in return. Though Loona was of the staunch personal conviction that she didn’t need to prove anything to anyone, let alone this ‘old man’ who only moments ago had a rifle pushed between her eyes, deep down something told her very enthusiastically to cooperate. With no other choice, the hellhound did as the feeling told her; what other choice did she have?

CRASH!!!

Snapping the group of three out of the question of Loona’s true identity was the sound of a loud metallic crash from somewhere deeper in the building. Instinctively, everyone looked upwards, coming to the collective conclusion that the source was from the floor directly above them. From the sounds of things, it could’ve been anything from a large rolling iron door slamming shut, to the

rusty pipework finally caving in on itself after years of abandonment. What it truly could be was anyone's best guess.

Vasily crouches down and picks up Loona's rifle, before abruptly shoving it into her hands. He states as plainly as possible; "You're on our side, yeah? If you're on our side, you'll fight through this alongside us."

"That's what I've been doing," Loona insisted right back; "Why do you think I'm here in the first place?"

"You tell me," Vasily quipped dryly as he cleared his throat with a phlegmy cough, then with a sure footing marched straight towards a small doorless entrance-way off to the left. He peeks around the doorway and analyzes the small room's contents, tilting his head upwards to look at something. Eventually he looked back towards Loona and Jim, and waved them over; "There's a stairwell here, follow me. And keep an eye out, they could be anywhere…"

"It has gotten quiet all of a sudden…" Jim whispered to Loona as they both followed Vasily in unison; "Where's everyone gone? That wasn't all of them, was it?"

"No…" Loona grimly whispered back as she scanned her surroundings attentively; "No, there's definitely more of those fuckers. Look, let's just keep it down, we gotta listen out for them. And stay alert, they might try something."

"Right you are…" Jim replied solemnly, allowing Loona to enter the stairwell before him as he closely followed.

An invisible but profound wall of musky odor smacked Loona square in the face as she entered into the stairwell, causing her to shudder in disgust. It was a foul, repugnant smell; one which was most associated with decades of neglect and decay, and could be smelt in any other place which possessed such an advanced extent of dilapidation. This stench, however, seemed entirely unique to this goliath brick 'Hell-on-Earth' — A mixture of machine oil, grease, gunpowder, and coal dust, all seasoned with the leisurely sprinkle of something long-since dead and mummified. Of course, the blood shed by the victims of Loona's vengeful rampage was only going to soak into the building and add more to that "sweet, sweet flavor".

Only adding to the whole feeling of decades-long abandonment was the staircase. The stairs in question were constructed entirely of black metal and spiraled upwards, the entire structure

supported by a thick steel pole bolted down to both the roof and the floor. Each careful, slow step Loona took caused it to creak and groan under her weight, rendering a stealthy ascent very much impossible. The ascent was slow and arduous, with Loona having to check each and every step she took to check the already dubious structural integrity of the next step upwards — the last thing she wanted was to fall and break her legs, a thought which made her shiver.

Before too long, Loona finally reached the top of the staircase, watching as Vasily exited the smelly old stairwell and onto what appeared to be a wide catwalk which stretched along the walls. Readying her rifle for action once again, Loona stepped carefully onto the catwalk and peered over the railing. There the hellhound could appreciate the sheer size and scale of the 'Powerhouse', the ground floor below clear for her to see. From high above, Loona could see the wretched body of the man who had almost choked her to death, a slick splatter of crimson and viscera plastering the floor and walls, shining underneath the periodically flickering bulb suspended by one of the below room's steel girders. Contrary to Loona's earlier assumptions, the walls dividing the building didn't go all the way up, a ten-foot gap being left between the rafters and the walls themselves to make way for the network of catwalks strewn about like grapevines.

The convoy of three patrolled into the center room which Loona had cleared five minutes prior — the 'pipe room', the hellhound had begun to dub it so in her mind. Far below was the ground floor, cluttered with pipes stretching out from the gargantuan stationary boiler as if it was a tree of rusty steel, the steam pipes climbing upwards across the walls like brown and black tendrils. They didn't climb up too far, however, disappearing into the walls through precisely cut holes in the masonry, adistributing the steam which once flowed like tamed torrents of hot air.

"You did a number on those two down there, 'ay?" Jim commented as he pointed to the floor below, referring to the two cadavers crushed under the one collapsed girder.

Loona glanced down at the rather morbid scene, paying barely any attention to it, then said; "Yep. You should've seen them, tried shooting at me and everything. I swear, none of these scumbags can shoot for shit."

"They almost got us a few times when we were tryna get in," Jim said on the contrary, maintaining a mildly hushed tone; "That was before you came into the picture, though."

"Keep it down, we're coming up to something here," Vasily hushed, his footing becoming unsure and sluggish as he raised his rifle slightly, prepared to aim if need be.

Loona looked ahead and saw that the catwalk seemed to be ending, transitioning from metal bridgework to sturdy brick and mortar flooring which jutted out from the side of the wall. Sure enough, shortly after the end of the catwalk was yet another doorway carved into the wall to Loona's right, an orange overhead lamp illuminating it with the little light its fading bulb could muster. There was no lack of caution as Vasily silently approached the doorway, Loona and Jim making their own efforts to stay quiet in turn with all eyes locked on the shut rotting green door.

Vasily stares at the door in thought, silently considering how to go around opening it safely. Without a hint that he had figured out an approach, he turned his head towards Loona who stared right back at him. Then he said just above a whisper; "Want to do the honors?"

Loona was momentarily bemused; "Do what now?"

The Russian cocks his head towards the door, this time telling her through the means of silent gesture. This time Loona got the hint, to her detestment; "No. Nuh uh, absolutely not. What am I to you, a meat shield?"

Vasily remained just as adamant as Loona; "I didn't say anything about you being a 'meat shield'. You want to fight on my side? You do as I direct. Open the door, lead the way."

"…Wow. You're actually a massive asshole," Loona half muttered to herself, forcing herself to approach the door and lead them all onwards.

With the "honors" now in her hands, Loona crept up to the door with her rifle poised to aim. Intently she inspects the almost comically archaic, gray iron slide-bolt lock drilled to the door, the iron slide-bolt itself pulled over in an iron ring screwed to the doorframe. From the years of decomposition which had taken place, however, the entire mechanism looked to be composed more of rust than the iron it was forged from.

Loona let out a restricted sigh as she pinched the bolt handle, making an attempt to slide it open. She tugs at it, discovering that it wouldn't budge to her inconvenience, prompting her to pull it harder, giving it a jiggle for good measure. It didn't work, the bolt remaining seized up with a thick layer of rust.

With no other viable option she could think of, Loona took a step back from the door and ordered; "Stand back, I'm breaching it."

A thunderous “THUD!!” echoed across the building like a shockwave as Loona slams her foot into the door, causing it to shift by an inch! In spite of the hellhound’s mighty kick, the lock defied her by remaining almost intact, though a slight crack had formed along the thick archaic bolt. Loona gave off another powerful kick: “THUNK!!”

“CRACK!! — <u>CHNK!!</u>”

On Loona’s second attempt at forcing the door open, the bolt finally split completely in half and gave way, allowing the door to swing violently inwards and collide with the wall it hung from: “THOOM!!!” With the way now clear, Loona aims the rifle in anticipation for whatever may come next, yet there was nobody to be seen. What lay before her was a dark corridor with two doorways to the left and right at the halfway point, the industrial electric lighting which once lit the hallway having long since fizzled out. At the very end of the hallway was yet another door, one which was thankfully slightly ajar and swinging loosely with an eerie, foreboding draft which blew through the corridor. Loona stared off into the darkness which thankfully wasn’t as oppressive as the one of the basement she escaped from, a rapid flash of lightning shining through a window the right room like a high-beam, followed by a tremendous ***“PANG!!!”***

After a second of hesitation, Loona sighed and beckoned; “Alright, follow me. And stay close, they could be anywhere...”

The three of them slowly made footfall through the corridor like an undermanned Platoon on patrol, scanning both unremarkable rooms which were filled with nothing but an old desk each — one since collapsed in on itself — as well as some indistinguishable bureaucratic paperwork which had long since deteriorated, a few bottles of whiskey and ale long since emptied, and the gaunt, hollow skeletal remains of some unfortunate rodents. Another bright flash of lightning lit up the corridor with a flicker as rain pelted down against the singular window in the right room, another seismic ***“BOOM!!”*** shaking the ground with its sheer might attributed to being a true ‘force of nature’.

Loona crept up to the door with methodical silence, crouching as she peeked through the slight opening. On the other side of this doorway was a covered bridge, its walls and ceiling made entirely out of steel and corrugated iron which displayed obvious and worrying signs of its age. Rain leaked through at multiple points in the ceiling as it bucketed down against the iron sheets, causing the whole bridge to rattle and reverberate as if an orchestra was performing within it. On the other side of this covered bridge was yet another wide open entranceway with a light flickering above it, beckoning for Loona to come across.

The hellhound stood upright and alert and turned to face the two humans accompanying her. With a silent nod which gave the ‘all clear’, Loona once more led the way, pushing the door open and beginning to cross over the roofed bridge. If the noise of tumbling rain wasn’t deafening enough from the relative comfort of the dingy hallway, it certainly was now; the whole racket of fiercely rattling iron sheets rendering verbal communication utterly impossible! It didn’t take long for Loona’s ears to begin aching from the noise, trying her best to cover them up with her one free hand as she held her rifle in the other. It was a slow process crossing that bridge due to the sheer unsturdy nature of the deteriorating structure, causing Loona to be unsure with her footing; however thankfully, the crossing looked to be almost over as the hellhound got closer and closer to the—

“CHNK!! — CRAK—PING!!”

“SHE’S COMING APART!!” Jim’s voice managed to boom over the thunderous rattling!

With the threat of plummeting to her death, Loona broke into an adrenaline-packed mad sprint for her life to the other side of the bridge, feeling the floor beginning to buckle and crack underneath each pounding step! She dives headfirst through the doorway and tumbles across the floor, hearing the failing crossing completely disintegrate behind her, the remnants of what once was a bridge perilously plummeting several feet to the ground!

“GAH! HAH, H-Hah—!!” Loona pants exhaustively as she quickly recuperates herself after escaping certain death, her body aching terribly from the sudden impact with the ground. Still slumped to the floor, Loona spun herself around to look at the aftermath, finding to her dismay that the bridge had utterly collapsed, though luckily Jim and Vasily were back safe and sound on the opposite side.

“YOU ALRIGHT OVER THERE?!” Jim shouted to Loona as he recovered from his own bout of adrenaline!

“Y-Yeah! Argh— I-I’m okay!” Loona yelled back in kind, groaning from the pain she felt through her arms, having landed hard on them; “Well crap, what the fuck now?!”

“We’ll have to find another way through to ya!” Jim bellows above the sound of pummeled rain as he gawked in shocked awe at the ruins below; “Shit, that could’ve killed us!”

“No kidding!” Loona remarked loudly, gawking down with wide eyes at the sheer destruction after heaving herself off the ground, a once sound bridge reduced to nothing but twisted steel and rust. Suddenly an improvised plan manifested itself in the forefront of Loona’s mind, a plan which she hurriedly relayed to the rest of the group; “Hey look, I-I’ll try and find a way out of here! When I do, I’ll call you guys over, wherever you are!”

“Sounds like a plan!” Jim agreed to the plan wholeheartedly, the rain and thunder nearly drowning out his answer; “Just don’t get yourself killed, alright?!”

“Ditto!!” Loona enthusiastically shouted right back, watching as both Jim and Vasily jogged back into the gloominess of the main ‘Powerhouse’.

Once more, the hellhound was alone to fend for herself.

Preparing herself for yet another calamitous and no doubt bloody push through to her ultimate goal, Loona dusts herself off and fixes up her hair, flinching and groaning from the aches as a result of her desperate leap. She looks down at the rifle lying on the floor, finding that it remarkably hadn’t sustained any damage, except of course for a few minor chips in the wooden stock, though nothing which would render it ‘out of action’. Just as Loona was about to pick up her rifle, she noticed something lying right next to it, her faintly glowing scarlet eyes widening in realization of what it was. Lying haphazardly on the floor barely a foot away from her weapon was a black rope composed of numerous knots, and sewn at the end of it… was a cross — it was Vasily’s prayer rope.

“No way… N-No fucking way…” Loona muttered to herself in disbelief with yet another slip of her tongue, deeply hesitating to pick it up after grabbing her rifle.

Loona stared at it in awe and intrigue, practically feeling the gargantuan spiritual significance it held as her deeply hesitant hand hovered over it. Did she want to touch it? What would happen if she did? It felt so wrong that she had to grab it in the first place! …Or did she *want* to grab it? After composing herself and preparing gravely for the worst, Loona shut her eyes as her fingers gripped the prayer rope, enclosing it in her palm! …With little event. The hellhound squinted one eye open, finding the black rope cusped in her hand, her fingers almost cradling it. It felt so strange to Loona that she was holding something like this, feeling all sorts of emotions and thoughts, most of them entirely incomprehensible. Out of everything she was feeling, one thing was for sure in her mind; she felt oddly… ***comforted*** by it.

“Crash!!!”

Another mighty metallic crash echoed from somewhere in the building, accompanied by the sound of men shouting and preparing themselves for Loona's vengeful presence. After looking down at Vasily's prayer rope once more and giving off a gruff sigh, the hellhound gripped her rifle and set off running again.

The Final Stretch.

Pandemonium - VI

Adrenaline and vigor coarsed through Loona's veins like an energy stimulant as she jogged through to the end of the hallway, Vasily's black prayer rope gripped so tightly in her hand that her fingers began to hurt. She held onto it with an iron grip as if her life depended on it, much like the 'Gewehr 98' currently slung over her shoulder, the blessed bullet still waiting patiently to be fired — "*all in good time*". In no time at all, Loona barged right through the end of the hallway and onto yet another metal platform, clattering loudly under her feet as if it heralded her arrival with unwelcome gusto and orchestra. Directly in front of Loona was a large metal cage which contained an elevator shaft stretching downwards, the worn-out cables swaying loosely as though the ascending room had long since been severed from the mechanism. The periodic booming voices of hurried men echoed from somewhere below on the ground floor of this new section of building, sounds of thrashing bootsteps accompanying the horrible tension lingering in the air like a putrid fragrance.

Snapping her head to the left revealed to Loona that there was only one extension to this platform, that being a metal staircase which hugged the walls and descended to the ground floor. Where else, but down? With this obvious direction now known to her, Loona slid the prayer rope into the left pocket of her jacket and began descending with almost immediate posthaste, the vengeful hellhound's rifle now once again grasped firmly in her hands. As she hurried vigorously down the stairs, Loona couldn't help but notice that something about this section of the 'Powerhouse' was… wrong. Not only was it far too quiet with nobody in sight — not even on the dust and debris-caked ground floor below — the atmosphere also had a godawful tense thickness to it. It was as if a large and invisible eldritch colossus was using up as much pure oxygen it could, and replacing it with its own crude mockery of that universal lung-enriching giver of life.

With each adrenaline-infused breath she took, Loona continued striding relentlessly down the stairs, her eyes widely searching for anyone to shoot to no avail; the ground below which was occupied by a maze of tall shelves and spent industrial equipment was completely void of life. The hellhound grew concerned by this, paranoid even, as if she knew that Malloy's ragtag band of 'merry men' and reprobates were planning an ambush. Soon Loona reached the halfway point of the continuously descending staircase, the hellhound sliding abruptly to a standstill to catch her breath, her heart pounding alarmingly fast in her chest. Each breath Loona took stung the back of her throat as she gasped greedily for that sweet nourishing oxygen, in spite of the oppressive evil feeling still lingering torturously in the air. Lightheadedness momentarily overcame Loona as she regained her strength to continue, pressing her back against the wall as a means of support, and closed her eyes for a measly second of much needed respite.

…

~Thnk~

Loona's eyes shot wide open when she heard the next downward step shift under someone's right, her head snapping to the right! … Sure enough, it was the girl she had seen earlier, standing in the gloomy light of the wall-mounted electric lamp buzzing beside her.

Loona narrowed her eyes with overwhelming bemusement and asked almost desperately; "W-Who are you?"

The girl didn't answer, merely staring at her with her dark blue eyes.

"I said who are you?!" Loona cried out again; "Give me some form of certainty, please! I don't need ghosts haunting me right now, I got enough on my plate! Do you hear me?? I've got enough!!"

Now Loona's ghostly visitor cocked her head slightly, a somber squint forming in her eyes in tandem. She looks down towards Loona's jacket and points. Then with a voice quiet and as soft as silk, whispered; "…That's papa's."

"Wh—…Excuse me?"

Not a muscle moved in the girl's body, standing as stiff as a statue with her finger unflinching and pointing towards a specific spot in Loona's… jacket. Then like a switch, Loona figured out what exactly the specter was talking about, her eyes widening as wide as they could've ever been. The hellhound's hand reached hurriedly into her left pocket and pulled out Vasily's prayer rope, staring at it with awe in her eyes before showing it to the girl.

With her eyes locked onto the girl, Loona asks; "This? Is this what you're talking about??"

"…Why do you have it?" The girl's voice sounded bleak, accompanied by a sad and confused look in her eyes.

Loona blinks twice after being hit with this admittedly good question, the hellhound looking down at the prayer rope to ponder it, letting the reality of what she held protectively in her hands sink in. Loona looks up once more, and soberly admits; "…I-I don't know."

“You should,” the girl responded near instantly, her delivery blunt as if the reason was obvious, taking Loona by surprise. The specter continues; “Papa never gave anything to anyone unless he trusted them to a certain point. He’s testing you.”

Loona squinted with overwhelming confusion; “Testing me… I’ve been tested throughout this entire thing. What, what’s he testing me on? What’s more to test??”

“He’s seeing if he can trust you,” the girl explained calmly, though with a sober flare to her voice; “Don’t betray his trust. He’s had that happen too many times in his life.”

“Okay. You know what? No,” Loona bluntly protested; “I’m not in the mood for “tests” or any other shit. He wants to play mind games with me? He can forget trying to “trust me” in the first place. I don’t need to prove squat to people, I’m—”

“Will you keep it safe?”

“What??”

“The prayer rope,” the girl repeats; “Will you keep it safe?”

“…Remember, sweetie; the responsibility is entirely on you…”

A powerful chill ran up Loona’s spine as she stood there silently, unsure of how to respond, Blitz’s words reverberating in the back or her mind as a staunch reminder. This whole thing had been the hellhound’s responsibility from day one, and it seemed as though the safekeeping of the ‘chetki’ was yet another responsibility of hers — a bitter pill to swallow of undeniably Holy origins, to be sure, but one which Loona feels she had to put up with and accept. Was this a test from the Heavens, those powers that be? Some elaborate sick prank they were pulling on her for the fun of it, to see how much they could push her until she finally broke?? From vivid dreams about ‘Guardians’, and a visit from a Horse-Riding ‘Spiritual Father’, and this is what it’s all led up to — safekeeping a prayer rope. The question which remains is “What next?” Loona couldn’t believe that this was the case; in fact, a prominent part of her refused to believe it! … However fate didn’t care for what she personally wanted to believe; this was reality, Loona’s reality, to its truest extent. Nothing could change that, and denying it would only destroy her — the hellhound knew this.

"…I-I'm not sure if I can, but…," the hellhound paused momentarily, looking down at the small black rope in her hands before looking back up at the specter; "…But I'll try. … I can't promise anything, but I'll try."

"That's all he needs to see. … That's all *'they'* need to see," the girl replies; "…*They* see something in you." And with that, before Loona could ask for a much needed elaboration, and before her very eyes… the girl in the yellow shirt vanishes.

Yet another inexplicable encounter later, and Loona was feeling especially drained, having long since grown sick and tired of them the very moment she set foot into the 'Powerhouse', against her will for that matter. The desire to have this entire carnival of psychological taxation and near-death experiences was now far greater than ever, motivating Loona to push herself off from the wall she leaned upon, and continue advancing — this time at a far more careful pace.

At last Loona reached the end of the stairs, stepping onto the cold and unforgiving ground floor which felt damp and awful against her feet, finding herself before yet more gloomily lit corridors. These corridors, however, were made of shelves; lots of them, and ones which stretched beyond Loona's own six-feet in height, making her seem pitifully small in comparison. Upon the numerous shelves was rows upon rows of haphazardly stored machine parts of inexplicable origin well past their expiry date, the rust which held them together rendering them so feebly brittle. To describe the pathway created by the shelves as a "maze" would be of no stretch of the imagination, the other side out of the seemingly endless corridors nowhere in sight, hidden somewhere in the gloom.

The scattered debris of brick and dust peppering the floor crunched under Loona's calculated step, the disturbed specks of rubble skipping along like pebbles as the culprit involuntarily kicked them. The maze of shelves was quiet; too quiet, the reverberations of shouting men suspiciously snuffed out for a reason unbeknownst to Loona. It is often said that some noise is better than no noise at all, for at least with sound comes the comfort of certainty that something was amiss; such was the case with an already tense Loona as she ventured further in a slow march. Coming up was a junction with two further corridors leading off to the left and right respectively, both of them populated with the same clutter-filled shelves which was quickly becoming a monotonous sight. Loona had a clear-cut choice as she stood in the center of the crossroads; 'left or right', a decision she was indecisive of.

…Then came a sound, one which was growing by the second.

Thnk—Thnk—Thnk—Thnk—Thnk—Thnk—

It was oh so faint as it started, but Loona's ears managed to pick it up before it could catch her by too much surprise. It was coming from the right.

Thnk—Thnk—Thnk—***THNK—THNK-CHFF! … Thnk… Thnk… Thnk… Thnk…***

…

Ch-Chik!

KRRRRRRRRTT!!

A hail of bullets comes flying through one of the shelves, sending careening projectiles dangerously close in Loona's general direction! That was the hellhound's cue to start high-tailing it to the left, running for her dear life as the thunderous footsteps followed, the sound of even more bullets jingling in machine-gun belts warning Loona that there was more where that came from! Just before she could flee around yet another sharp right turn out of harm's way, the pursuer opens fire again: ***KRRRRRRRRTT!!***

"AAAGH!!" Loona yelps out in pain, feeling a bullet graze across her left forearm! She didn't have time to stop and assess any possible injuries, her mind firmly fixated on dashing wildly for her dear life, desperately trying to find a spot to take cover in! That's when she saw it; a particular section of shelving which had caved in on itself, just low enough for Loona to jump over, but adequate enough to make hiding not impossible. There was much effort from the desperately fleeing hellhound as she took a leap of faith over the wreckage, managing to evade yet another salvo of machine-gun fire which barely missed her! Crouching herself behind all the pile of ruins proved to be more of a challenge to Loona than expected, the rubble composed of loose brick and twisted metal shifting every time she moved, creating a most unwelcome noise of shifting debris.

*Thnk-Thnk-Thnk-Thnk-****THNK-THNK-THNK-THNK!***

…

A nauseating stillness polluted the air in its fragrance as the machine-gunner stood completely still, obviously waiting for some form of movement to arise. He was breathing low and deep like some colossal predatory animal, the sound muffled as if he was wearing some kind of respirator or mask. Loona huddled herself behind the collapsed shelves as her injured forearm began to throb painfully, clasping one hand over her mouth for good measure in case she breathed too loud. Nervous beads of sweat trickled down Loona's temple as she sat there completely still, the hellhound too terrified for her own life to move even an inch; one wrong move now, and she would go into that final "goodnight" in a hail of hot lead! Though she couldn't see him on account of her back pressed against her makeshift cover, Loona could tell that whoever this was was right on the other side, searching for her in a cold and methodical silence. After an eternity had passed, the machine-gunner began patrolling deeper into the maze, his heavy bootsteps sluggishly advancing down the pathway his target must've taken. A small gap in the twisted pile of metal Loona was hiding behind was enough to give her an opportunity to see who the gunner was, the hellhound peering through the slither of opening to catch a glimpse of his appearance.

Her pursuer was massive; broad-shouldered and tall, a literal tank of a human who was cloaked in a long, black duster coat just as large and imposing as him. Stretched across his torso were two machine-gun belts slung over each shoulder, crossing over him like a pair of brass-filled bandoliers. Over his face was a very old-fashioned leather gas mask and goggles, complete with a large black hood draped over his head, obscuring his forehead and ears. He looked like death himself, armed with what Loona recognized to be an 'MG42' which had been modified for automatic belt feeding. The still smoking-hot barrel aimed firmly down the corridor as it left a wispy trail of gunsmoke, ready to obliterate anything unfortunate enough to stand in the way of its crosshairs.

With highly fragile but growing hope for a window of opportunity to make her move, Loona listened to the machine-gunner's bootsteps vanish further into the distance, marching on and on until they grew muffled. After she was confident enough that the patrolling gunner was gone, Loona let out a short and restricted sigh of relief, lowering her hand from her muzzle before looking at her left forearm to assess her injury. As expected, there was a steadily growing patch of tar-black blood staining the ripped sleeve of her maroon jacket, signifying to Loona that the wound, although shedding a considerable amount of blood, wasn't anything life threatening to her greatest relief. A tourniquet was in order, one which Loona begrudgingly made out of her jacket's torn sleeve, ripping it from the remaining threads and wrapping it snugly around the wound. Luckily for her, the sleeve was adequate enough to stop the bleeding, allowing for her to press onwards.

Another thunderous roar of gunfire reverberates through the walls as the gunner opens fire sporadically, his patience with Loona evidently running out, and fast! After silently hopping over the cover which might as well just saved her life, the hellhound pressed onwards, her injured forearm still oozing with pain though bearable. Yet more bursts of explosive rounds rang out as Loona cautiously navigated, peeking around every corner she turned in case her evil-intentioned pursuer was there, her firearm always unwaveringly aimed to fire. Then, after what felt like eons of navigating this industrial labyrinth, came hope; a literal light at the end of the tunnel.

Standing before Loona was a break in the maze, leading to what appeared to be yet another massive boiler surrounded by the moving parts of what gave the 'Powerhouse' its name; resting on the machine floor like a colossus of an automaton having long since fallen to eternal sleep. Loona wasted no time in answering the silent beckoning this change in scenery offered, the hellhound breaking off into a sprint towards the comparatively more open space, then hearing to her horror the sound of pounding footsteps growing louder from within the depths of the maze — he had found her again!

KRRRRRRRRRRTT!!! — KRRT—KRRRRRRRRTT!!!

Bullets whizzed past Loona's head like streaks of lightning as she narrowly escaped certain death, making a sharp left up yet another metallic staircase in a wild dash for survival! Ricochet 'pings' diving between each mad-dash step Loona took encouraged her to keep going, hoping beyond hope that the next salvo of hot brass wouldn't be her end! If it wasn't for her remarkable agility, she would certainly be dead already! Then came a miracle.

KRRRR— click-click-click!

Now was her chance! Soon as Loona reached the landing on top of the steps, she spun around with her longarm aimed, and fired!

BAM!!!

THK!!

With a sickening sound of a small caliber round piercing through the machine-gunner's coat and into his right shoulder, he let out a muffled roar of pain as his weapon fell noisily to the ground! That wasn't the end of his pursuit however; without delay, he reached into his coat and pulled out a sawed-off shotgun, then returned fire using his remaining good arm!

POW!!!

Shrapnel flew right past Loona's face as she pounced out of the way, fleeing with almost break-neck agility as she ran down the catwalk! She needed a plan of counterattack, and fast; a plan which she hastily materialized in her head, turning her eyes towards the gargantuan boiler to her

right below the platform! Loona executed the plan quickly, throwing herself over the railing and landing feet-first on top of the boiler with a loud "***CLANG!***", missing yet another hail of shotgun shrapnel as the hooded huntsman opened fire again from behind with a loud "***POP***"!

Upon landing atop the boiler with sure footing, Loona took another shot: ***BAM!!!*** — A miss!

A deep grimace formed on Loona's face as she ran, cocking the bolt back in less than half a second before being barraged with another inaccurate burst of shotgun pellets! The end of her path was in sight which lay before an eight-foot drop to the floor below, causing Loona to stop suddenly and whirl around, taking yet another shot with far more accuracy: ***BAM!!!*** — Straight into her assailant's abdomen! In a loud and guttural bellow of agony, Loona's would-be killer collapsed to the ground as weakness engulfed him, though his assignment of killing the hellhound pressed him to keep on living. With his back pressed up against the wall, the gunman attempts to reload his gun with weak, shaking hands, his breaths labored and sharp as he stared coldly into Loona's very soul behind that archaic gas mask of his.

Loona had no intention of letting the gunman live any longer, leaping back onto the catwalk and descending down upon him, using the stock of her rifle to smack him across his head! A vibrant rage burned in Loona's eyes as she resorted to devolving into brutality, balling her right hand into a fist before punching him repeatedly square in the face: ***"THUNK! THUNK! THUNK! THUNK!!"*** Blow, after blow, after blow, the hellhound relentless in her brute-strength punches, the lenses of her assailant's goggles shattering as blood began to seep through, the smell of copper polluting the air around her.

THUNK! THUNK! THUNK! THWAK! THWAK! … THWAK! … THWAK! … Thwak…

There was a rancorous wildness in Loona's eyes as she stared hatefully at the now lifeless body of the machine-gunner, watching the man's lifeless pupils "staring" right back at her. Having now won the battle but not the war, Loona got back up onto her feet with trembling hands, not once letting her fierce gaze falter away from her latest victim. Suddenly she clenches her teeth together into a lock-tight pained scowl, then looking up into the heavens… that's when she exploded.

"…Are you watching me up there? … ARE YOU SEEING THIS?! DO YOU SEE WHAT'S HAPPENING, WHAT I'VE JUST DONE?!" Loona shoots a pointed shaking finger at the body; "LOOK!! DID YOU SEE WHAT I JUST DID TO THIS DEGENERATE PIECE OF SHIT?! I BET YOU'RE WATCHING THIS UNFOLD, HUH?! OH I KNOW YOU'RE WATCHING ALL OF THIS WITH SO MUCH INTEREST, I KNOW YOU ARE!! I'M YOUR MOTHERFUCKING GUINEA PIG TO WATCH RUN AROUND AND DO ALL SORTS OF CRAP!! … WHY ME, HUH?! I SAID WHY ME?! …W-Why me??"

There was no reply. Instead, a feeling. A feeling that she needed to press on, to fulfill her duty. By the time she had done what she set out to do, maybe then would Loona finally understand ‘why her’.

“Please help me, at least give me some strength…” Loona quietly begged with one hand over her face, her voice cracking with a growing weariness which felt so heavy on her shoulders. And with that, with no other option… the hellhound pressed on.

Just as Loona recomposed herself, stifling the pricks of tears forming on the corners of her eyes and picking up her rifle, there came an unexpected chill which coursed through her body like a mountain draft. This made Loona turn around and look back down towards the stairs she had ascended, figuring that the sudden ill wind had come from somewhere on the ground floor. As much as it sounded ridiculous to herself, the growingly weary hellhound couldn’t help but think that this inexplicable draft was enticing her, calling her name in a way which she had never known before. And thus, with all of her effort, inner strength, and a growing uneasiness in her stomach which she had grown used to at this point, Loona answered the call. She was going to meet her ultimate fate in this anarchistic pandemonium anyway; what was the point in delaying the inevitable outcome any further? It’s best not to keep the devil waiting, so to speak. Such is the indifferent cruelty which is reality.

The metal staircase rattled and groaned underneath the weight put upon them, the structure’s protests ceasing as soon as Loona reached the floor proper, the cruel coldness which rose up from the dust and debris-ridden ground embracing her in all of its unwelcoming splendor. The air felt cold, so unnaturally cold. Everything about this entire labyrinth of a building full of hostile men and the smell of gun-smoke and death was so incredibly wrong; it was as if it didn’t belong on the earth it stood upon, like it was a tumor composed of brick and mortar. Loona’s hair stood on end as a second wintry blast of air overcame her, this time being pushed against her back, coaxing her to turn around.

That’s when she saw it — Built within the far back wall in a manner which made it appear incredibly out of place, was an arched entrance-way leading into a long, stretching corridor. For the thrice time, another elegant brush of air swept over Loona from the peculiar doorway like a gentle wave, informing her in its own strangely beauteous unspoken language that ‘this was the way’. Beyond the archway and the corridor is where the hellhound would find what she was searching for — the reason why she was here in the first place.

A light but growing snarl of vengeance and determination grew across Loona’s muzzle as her eyes began to glow with righteous anger once again, breaking into a stalwart march towards this “gateway to hades”. With every echoing footstep, Loona drew closer and closer, mentally preparing

herself for the last decisive battle in this horrible, mentally-taxing war. Twenty feet became eighteen, then fifteen, twelve, ten… then one.

Loona raised her eyes upwards above the entrance, a message catching her attention. Sure enough, above this ill-fitting and crudely carved doorway was a message written in large, bold letters; "***AVIDE SUSCIPIAN VOS***".

"Yeah, I'm coming for you, you rotten shitbag. Don't you worry…" Loona growled in a mutter, flexing her fingers which caused them to crackle. She was ready.

One final preparation was in order. Before advancing beyond the archway with the foreboding sign above it, Loona slid back the bolt on her rifle and peered inside the chamber. There was one round left — the blessed bullet. The hellhound's face stiffened into a cold expression as she locked the bolt back into place, letting out a guttural determined huff and marching straight into the lengthy, torch-lit passage.

As Loona ventured further and further with a brisk march, Malloy's echoey disembodied voice spoke to her; "You're not one to give up, are ya? You're very stubborn, I'll give you that."

"No. I'm REALLY not one to give up. If you haven't figured that out by now, then you really do have your head up your ass," Loona confirmed with utmost defiance, continuing her stride with the rifle's bayonet leading the way like a shield. She continued taunting him; "You really are gutless, Malloy. I mean come on, you're pathetic! Instead of fighting me like a man, you pussy out and send your pack of dorks after me?? I've slaughtered them all! And now? I'm coming for you; right here, right now!"

If provocation was what Loona wanted, it is what she got, Malloy's tone flaring up into anger and frustration; "You have no idea what you're getting yourself into, girlie, what you're disrupting; you never have! I am only maintaining a balance in the world which needs to be maintained, a job which needs to be done on a routine basis because I MYSELF chose this! I opened this 'Hive' for them decades ago, and it is my responsibility to maintain it! If you kill me now, they'll eventually find someone else and the process will continue as normal. Think, woman! I am the status quo! I am what is preventing my burden from being transferred to some other fool!!"

"As if I care!" Loona barks right back; "If they want to tie their souls to those things like you, then so be it! It's not my problem!"

“***IT WILL BE YOUR PROBLEM!!***” Malloy’s disembodied voice bellows, echoing through the corridor; “You WILL die at my hand tonight, and I will bring Jim-boy and that bastard Tsarist down with you!! Their deaths will be on your conscience even if you survive tonight, and you will have to live with the knowledge that their blood is on your filthy, stupid, pointless little hands!!”

“HA!! Oh yeah?!” Loona openly called Malloy’s bluff with vigor, her march unfaltering and steadfast; “We’ll see about that!”

There was no immediate rebuke from Malloy as Loona continued her march down the hallway, passing torch after torch which acted as a substitute for the more logical solution of electric lighting, giving it the appearance of a medieval crypt. As Loona flounced down this unusually long passage without falter, she noticed that certain sections of the crude pale-gray walls were engraved with shapes beyond her comprehension. Ornamentations vaguely resembling what would be seen in old Roman or Ancient Greek architecture, yet different enough to make them appear most otherworldly. Upon glaring curiously at the mosaics as she passed them, Loona came to the conclusion that whoever had carved these markings into the stucco of these walls, couldn’t have created them in a sane frame of mind — go figure.

In another burst of thundery echo, the reanimated corpse’s gravelly disembodied voice shouted again; “Many a man have met their fate due to their own self-indulgent hubris, woman! Their deaths too were excruciating! Do you really want to die at the hands of your own misjudged self-confidence?!”

Loona was having none of this; “I’ve made up my mind! And I’m not like ‘many a man’, fuck you very much! I’m my own person!!”

“Then you really are a ‘dead woman walking’!!” Malloy’s voice boomed, each syllable bouncing off the walls with great intensity; “Are you sure you want to go out like this?!”

“…Positive,” Loona muttered angrily to herself.

The end of this lengthy hallway was drawing nearer, the reality which Loona was about to face having since hit home. As the hellhound drew closer and closer to the devilish mockery of a ‘sanctum’, the potent stench of death began to sting her nose, sending a disgusted shiver down her spine. Then for one final time, another wind blew through Loona, cutting into her very fiber — *a dark, twisted wind.*

Loona slowed her pace as she stepped through the entrance way, looking out in morbid awe at the chamber she now found herself in. The space was huge and largely empty, the brick walls stretching high up like straight sheer cliffs, their texture looking more akin to that of rock faces than anything resembling man-made construction. Above Loona's head stretching around this great 'anti-sanctum' was a raised platform with guardrails, hugging the walls of this supernatural chamber's entire circumference, access to them granted by ladders placed at certain points. Leading off from these platforms to the left and right were further passageways leading to who-knows-where, lit up by more of the torches used to light up the hall Loona had just passed through. But this was nothing compared to what stood in the dead-center of this chamber of evil intent; a massive, crude, godforsaken monolith stood in the middle of the room, one which possessed near impossible geometry, and stretched upwards for what had to be at least twenty feet. At the foot of this plinth of highly dubious origin was a large table prepared for a ritual; candles, animal and human skulls, and all. Lo and behold, standing before the ghastly altar, dressed in a long deep-blue robe etched with the same otherworldly patterns seen in the hallway, was Malloy, his vainly "blessed" lever-action rifle held in both his hands as he turned to face Loona.

Malloy's pinpoint yellow eyes glared intently at the intruding hellhound, shaking his head slowly and stating; "You've got a lot of nerve to step in here tonight."

Loona shrugged, lightly baring her razor-sharp teeth to hint that she wasn't fooling around; "Guess I do." The hellhound briefly scans the room with an eagle eye, not once turning her head away from the man who had made her life hell for the past fortnight; "So where's the rest of you dickweeds, huh? Did they wimp out on you?"

The reanimated corpse shook his head, the joints in his neck audibly cracking; "Nah, nothing like that. I sent them off, you know? I don't need them anymore, so I got them out of harm's way. I'm a callous old cunt, but I know not to cause collateral damage to people who don't need to get involved… unlike you and your mates."

"Right…" Loona growled in a voice which trailed off, the urge to shoot Malloy dead then and there oh so overwhelming. She knew, however, that the risk was too high to pull off something like that; she needed an 'angle of attack', a way to catch him off guard and then strike. As much as she wanted to kill Malloy, Loona knew that her real target was that great towering monolith behind him; she needed to destroy that first before finishing its sadistic caretaker off, to go for the "jugular" so to speak.

After eyeing the monolith and its numerous otherworldly carvings with intent to destroy it, Loona snaps her eyes back to Malloy, before grinning and remarked; "I'm sure they're glad they're gone, 'cause I would've slaughtered them all too. So what old man, is it one-on-one? Just you and me?"

Now one thing Loona had learnt was not to expect anything from Malloy, to always be aware of the one-in-many tricks he had proven he could pull off on her. The art of *'expecting the unexpected'* had pretty much been a part of the hellhound's life for so long now, having to survive through who-knows-how-long in the adoption center and even until present day; letting her guard down was something Loona rarely did until recently. In saying this, no amount of *'expecting the unexpected'* could prepare her for what would transpire next.

Just as Loona finished calling Malloy's bluff, the horrific cry of some beastly animal thundered across the chamber, the acoustics intensifying the unknown creature's call. The ground shook underneath Loona's feet as she looked around for the creature, her eyes wide with a mixture of awe and fear of just how massive and powerful it must've been to create such a tremendous sound. Not only did the sound terrify the hellhound as she looked aimlessly around for the source, but a flicker of familiarity began to arise within her mind, as if she had heard it before.

Before Loona could have too much time to figure out 'what' or 'who' it was, Malloy grinned wider, utilizing the remnants of his lips to do so, and wryly said; "Nah, I wouldn't say 'one-on-one', per se. I bought a little bitta help along with me tonight. … ***HEY BIRDMAN!!*** Someone's here to see ya, come out!!"

THOOM! — THOOM! — THOOM! — THOOM!

"You know, girlie…" Malloy remarks as a gargantuan figure of black and four glowing red eyes manifests itself from behind the monolith, coming to greet Loona and its apparent master; "It's always good to have friends in high places, yanno?"

"H-Holy shit, no…" Loona gasped, gazing wide-eyed at the creature she was coming face-to-face with, realizing who it was before too long. She breathlessly uttered his name; "Stolas…"

An evil, purely malicious phlegm-filled cackle boomed from the back of Malloy's throat; "**HEHEHE—HAH!!** Ahh, I knew you'd recognize this big bastard! Look at him! Petrifying, isn't he?!"

'Petrifying' was definitely an accurate descriptor for Stolas in this massive Eldritch-esque form, and then some. In truth, Loona had never seen the owl prince in such a form before, except for when Octavia went missing, and when he bailed herself, Millie, Moxxie, and Blitz out from those agents several months ago. However that time Stolas was on Loona's side as an ally in need; this time, he looked to be eyeing the hellhound with nothing but malice and savagery in his hot-red eyes, allowing Loona to truly appreciate what those aforementioned agents must've been feeling —

overwhelming physical fear. Stolas looked much like a living, breathing monolith himself, his jet-black wild feathers and hulking, giant body dwarfing Loona by at least five times her own size. His beak which glowed red like his eyes as if an inferno was burning within looked powerful enough to gnaw the hellhound in half, and any wrong move would render that imagined hypothesis a gruesome, bloody reality.

Loona scowled far angrier than before, growling with ferocity; “What the hell did you do to him?!”

Malloy outstretched his arm towards the beastly and rabid Stolas with an open palm, almost proud of what the prince had become; “I’ve bettered him is what I’ve done! All of those years of wasted potential with this pathetic specimen, and he never thought to let himself go; to become this! **A DARK PRINCE, GUARDIAN OF THE MONOLITH!! STALWART SERVANT OF THE CONGREGORS!!**”

Stolas’ bright red pupiless eyes harbored a fanatical, ruthless barbarity within them as they stared hatefully at Loona, a low spine-chilling growling-hiss emanating from his beak like the bellow of a crocodile. The owl prince’s monstrous talons clicked loudly against the cold, hard floor he stood upon when he repositioned his footing. At that very point did the hellhound standing fearfully before him realize he was on all fours like some primitive beast — a goetia’s most unadulterated, evilest form. Something burned painfully within Loona’s heart, an awful realization that perhaps her home, Hell or Hades, wasn’t as clear-cut and black-and-white as she understood. After all, Difficilis Est Revelatio.

Then came a straightforward and blunt order from Malloy, this time directed at Loona; “Raise your rifle.”

Loona’s eyes darted away from the Eldritch Stolas and towards Malloy. She didn’t say a word, instead glaring hatefully at him.

“I said raise your rifle,” Malloy repeated; “Time is running out for you.”

“Yeah, okay… Yeah, I’ll… raise my RIFLE!” Loona sharply aimed the muzzle directly between Malloy’s eyes, causing Stolas to let out a short demonic screech, poising himself to strike!

Though the mummified cadaver didn’t flinch. Instead, he let out a smirk and briefly chuckled through his clenched rotting teeth, before saying; “You have a choice, Loona. This is my ultimatum, so choose wisely if you know what’s good for you. Either you shoot me, and have

birdman here filet you until there's nothing left but your spine, or shoot the bird here and you'll walk a free—"

BAM!!!

The fired blessed bullet tore through the middle of Malloy's head like a bolt of lightning as he seized up with pain, his legs buckling which in turn caused him to fall back-first to the ground!

THWUMP!!!

"ROOOOOOOOOOOAAAAAHHHH!!!"

A massive blur of black and red came charging towards Loona as Stolas advanced with break-neck speed! The goetia closes in on the hellhound like a whirlwind, grabbing her tightly with one large talon and lifting her up off her feet! Loona strained and writhed against Stolas' firm grip, trying to set herself free from the crushing weight throughout her body to no avail! With fear entrenched in her eyes, Loona stared right into the rabid goetia's massive ruby-red eyes as adrenaline and terror coursed through her veins!

"SCREEEEEEEEEEEEAAAAAHHHHHHGGGGHH!!!"

Just as all hope was lost and her fate seemed sealed, Stolas suddenly started screeching wildly in excruciating pain, causing him to lurch back and drop Loona back towards the ground! The hellhound landed clumsily back on her feet and looked up, noticing that the tar-black talon which the owl prince had used to grab her looked to be smoldering as if he had just been set on fire, noticeable plumes of smoke rising up between his crooked talons — something had prevented him from crushing Loona to death. After extinguishing the flames from his hand, Stolas turned his ferocious eyes back towards Loona, his talon reaching out for more, a thirst for blood unquenched! Then—

BANG—BANG!!!

"SHRIIIKK!! — ROOAH!! *AAARRRAAAAGH!!!*"

Two loud gunshots ring out boisterously as two brass rounds plunge right into Stolas' monstrous body! Loona's mouth slid agape as she turned her head to the right, towards the platforms. Lo and behold, standing with their rifles still aimed towards the shrieking, writhing strigiform were Jim and Vasily, the barrels of their longarms still smoking hot!

Vasily, with sheer baritone to his voice, recited a script in Cyrillic from the top of his head without fault; "***Gospodi Lisuse Khriste, Syne Bozhiy, poraziv drevnego zmeya i svyazav yego v Tartare uzami t'my, zashchiti menya ot setey yego!!***"

The passages obviously had an effect on the corrupt Stolas as he grew even more agitated, letting out ear-splitting shriek after ear-splitting shriek as he tried to cower and drown out the words! "KEEP FIRING ON IT!!" Vasily ordered Jim in between breaths in his recitation, the young man obeying the elder's command and plunged another four rounds into the owl demon's colossal body, the projectiles absorbing themselves into his face and arms but not seeming to do much in the way of meaningful damage! The Russian darts his eyes directly towards Loona, before barking and pointing sharply at the monolith; "DESTROY THAT UNHOLY THING!!"

"WITH WHAT?!" Loona desperately shouted over Stolas' ear-splitting screeches of pain, the owl prince retching and twisting like a stabbed reptile that had a million joints.

As if the hellhound had asked the right question at the right time, Vasily momentarily paused his recitation, pulling out a box of matches and threw them as hard as he could towards Loona. Luckily she catches the box in her hands, gripping it in her right hand as her left was occupied with her rifle which she had just reloaded. With the box now in Loona's firm grip, Vasily shouted; "Strike one of the matches and press it against the monolith! That will set it aflame!!"

Loona gawked at the Russian with utter disbelief; "WHAT?! But there's—"

Without warning, a still wildly erratic Stolas swings around having regathered his bearings and begins tearing at the catwalk which Vasily and Jim stood on, clawing at it with his wretched talons! As the two men frantically retreat further along the platform buckling under Stolas' thrashing claws, Vasily calls out to Loona in desperation; "JUST DO AS I SAY, WILL YOU?! SET THE WRETCHED THING ALIGHT!!"

As the abysmal gargantuan bird creature kept pursuing the fleeing men, Loona saw this as her opportunity to run towards the monolith, breaking out into a frantic sprint with great strides! Just as the hellhound honed in on the towering plinth dedicated to burnt offerings, she felt a tremendous force grab at her right leg, almost causing her to fall head over heels! Loona looked back towards

her caught leg to see something which sent a horrified chill coursing through her entire body; Malloy's horribly disfigured face was staring right back at her with his one remaining eye, most of his features completely decimated by Loona's shot except for most of his jaw, and his left eye which glared evilly into her horrified expression.

Malloy's bones clicked and his muscles strained audibly as he pulled himself upright, not once letting go of Loona's leg even as she tried to kick herself free to surprisingly no avail! He growled viciously at her through bloody breaths; "HRRRRGGHH….. Ohhh, you don't know when to give up **DO YA?!**"

THWACK!!

Another punch was dealt across Loona's face as she lurched back, stumbling back up on her feet with her bayonet pointed towards her assailant! "STAY AWAY FROM ME, YOU PRICK!!" Loona barked with great volume, her voice echoing over Stolas' eldritch shrieks!

Malloy uprighted himself as best he could as he squared off against Loona, then reached into his filthy brown coat and pulled out a lengthy hunting knife! "You wanna fight, huh?? Come on then!! I'm right here, girlie!!"

Malloy lunges towards Loona like a sprung serpent at its prey, his knife missing the agile hellhound by barely an inch as she dodges his attempt at striking! As the disheveled corpse staggered clumsily from his miss, Loona whirls around and fires around into his back: "***BAM!!!***"

This was only met by amused cackling from Malloy; "Ya think those regular shots are going to affect me, ya dumb whore?! **YOU ONLY HAD ONE SHOT, AND YA FUCKED IT!!"**

With even more gusto to his lunge, the unhinged madman struck at Loona and managed to cut into Loona's jacket, just missing her skin by a literal hair! Loona returned the strike by thrusting the bayonet deep into Malloy's attacking arm which in turn caused him to drop his knife in excruciating pain! That ultimately was Victor's breaking point, prompting him to retaliate by throwing himself against Loona, sending her toppling backwards, her weapon flying from her hands and far out of her reach! Now with both of them at an equal disadvantage, the fight between the hellhound and the crazed lunatic turned into a brawl of fists, claws, and jaws; Loona wasting no time at all in clamping her wrathful jaws hard around Malloy's neck, sending spouts of putrid blood gushing all over the floor! Malloy countered this by grabbing her right arm and twisting it painfully, while at the same time Loona thrashed and threw him around like a limp rodent!

Though her efforts were still boisterous and energetic, Loona began to feel herself grow weaker with the constant fighting she had to endure; the earlier altercations she had with Malloy's pack of fellow reprobate criminals finally taking its toll. Upon being thrown across the floor by Loona after dealing his own close-fisted blows against his enemy, the wretched demon of a man recognised her emerging weakness, taunting the vengeful hellhound through his ripped and bloodied throat; "**HAHAH!!** Getting tired there, are ya?!"

"Noh—hah… Not yet, you son of a bitch!!" Loona snapped through bated breath, wiping her mouth from the foul taste of Malloy's rancid blood with her arm.

Both opponent's attention was driven towards Stolas who was still pursuing Jim and Vasily, the bird demon's shrieks and roars sounding like nothing that Loona had ever heard before. It was clear that miraculously both men were at a stalemate against their demonic opponent, the Russian's relentless recitation holding Stolas back, while the owl prince held them both in place and lunged defensively at them, though never being able to reach. Loona saw this in full, noticing that it was less Stolas restraining himself, and more that he physically couldn't, as if the words that Vasily uttered with great vocal force prevented the prince from doing harm.

It was in this moment of distraction did Malloy strike once more at Loona, who only noticed him retaliating before she had time to react! "UNFF, AARGH!!" Loona cried out in pain as she hit the floor, struggling with all her might against the remarkable force the horrific brute pinning her down possessed! Then came another set of punches; "***THWACK! THWACK!!***" — Right across Loona's face, light bruising and scuff marks starting to appear across her muzzle and cheeks.

"**IT'S A DOG EAT DOG WORLD, GIRLIE**," Malloy bellowed as fought hard against Loona's powerful struggles, feeling her unsheathed claws slashing across his chest and neck; "**YOU'RE— AGGH!!— Y-YOU'RE JUST LIVING IN DENIAL OF IT!! GIVE IN TO THE NATURAL ORDER OF THINGS, AND…**" Before he could finish his speech, Malloy noticed something strange about the positioning of the hellhound's left arm; she seemed to be taking great care in guarding a specific part in her battle-torn jacket, namely her pocket. Upon noticing it, the maniac stares back in Loona's eyes and asks in an intimidating tone; "What are you doing??"

"Heh… H-Heheh. Oh, I'm glad you asked!"

Loona's hand slipped into her left pocket and shot back out, quickly revealing the prayer rope now clasped in between her fingers, shoving it right into Malloy's chest which caused him to burn! A demonic, inhuman shriek of agony emanated from the reanimated cadaver as he struggled to set

himself free from the literal fire burning into his chest; but the hellhound pinned him exactly where she wanted him, digging her claws into his collar to hold him in place!

Loona grinned vengefully into Malloy's widened eye and stated; "I'm gonna make you regret ever fucking with ME!!" She flung Malloy aside and sprung back up on her feet with great agility, her eyes set firmly on her target! Like an eagle honing in on a defenseless serpent, Loona strides on all-fours towards the discombobulated mutant, grabbing him with her powerful jaws once again and begins tearing him to shreds! Chunks of remaining flesh from Malloy's rotten husk peeled and tore off from the sheer force of being thrown around, g-forces enveloping him from every direction! After feeling him weaken significantly enough, Loona unhinged her bite from Victor and tossed him aside like nothing, her focus now returned back to the monolith. With her eyes firmly locked onto the pillar of burnt offerings, the hellhound without rest broke into a hard sprint!

It wasn't just her focus which had returned to the structure.

A humongous wall of black and vibrant red appeared in front of the monolith before Loona could get too close, forcing her to skid to a stop and look upwards! There stood Stolas, wholeheartedly fulfilling the title which Malloy has bestowed upon him, with his gigantic wings spread out completely to intimidate the puny hellhound at his feet, forming a massive wall of vantablack feathers. The owl-beast let out another booming screech to warn Loona to stay away, a warning which she could not accept; she came here to cast the monolith into flames, and nothing was going to stop her, not even a familiar face.

Loona put herself into a defensive stance with her hands pushed towards Stolas, Vasily's prayer rope dangling in her left. She pleaded desperately to the owl prince, trying to reason in vain; "Please… Stolas, come on, listen to me! Don't make me do this to you!"

If any humanity remained in Stolas in this form, it didn't shine through. The owl demon continues to hiss and threaten to attack Loona, even coming close to swiping her with his massive talon, only for the hellhound to throw herself out of its path just in time.

To Loona's utter grief, it seemed as if for as long as Stolas was designated as '*Guardian of The Monolith*', he wouldn't play ball. And so, with much hesitation, she forced herself to make a move. Through gritted teeth and heavy breaths, the hellhound tightly shut her eyes and uttered regretfully; "I'm so sorry…"

Suddenly Loona threw herself forward, her left hand punching right into Stolas' body as the prayer rope made contact with the prince's feathers, setting the area around it alight in a plume of smoke

and fire! Though the owl giant was being scolded with hot flames, Loona remained untouched as if an invisible protective barrier formed around her!

“SHRRRRIIIIIIIAAAAAAAAAGGGGHHHHH!!!!
RRRRRAAAAAAAAAAAAAOOOOOAAAAAAAAAA!!!!!”

BOOM!!

Stolas is then thrown back in a spontaneous explosion of blue light, sending his gigantic form tumbling backwards with a gargantuan “THOOM” which echoed loudly throughout the ‘anti-sanctum’! As she felt the shockwave of the explosion subside, Loona opened her eyes to a squint and peered towards Stolas, finding the massive creature slumped to the ground with no signs of movement. However there was no time yet to check on him; the path to the monolith was finally free, and the beings which would accept Malloy’s presumed offering would arrive at any second! With this in mind, Loona rushed up to the monolith and fished the box of matches out of her jacket’s right pocket! She fished a match out and struck it against the phosphorus side of the box, instantaneously lighting a flame which burned a bright orange.

Then came the moment which Loona had come all of this way for; the big eventuality which she had suffered for days on end for. All of that searching, the mental and physical pain she and others around her had been through, had all let up to this. It all felt so unbelievably surreal, like a vivid fever dream; as if she was going to wake up in her bed and realize she was still in the midst of the horrors beyond her sane comprehension. With the match now aflame, Loona set it against the surface of the colossal monolith and hurried away, feeling the spontaneous heat on her back as she retreated — The deed had been done.

FWOOOOOOOSH!!!

Like a bonfire laced with petrol, the light crackling of the fire turned into a deep roar as it turned into an absolute inferno, consuming every part of the monolith including the offering table; the dagger, large dark-blue patterned cloth, candles, and skulls being quickly absorbed by the bright orange glow. Loona got to a safe enough distance and spun around to watch the fire, watching in awe as it engulfed the unholy pillar, noticing to her intrigue that the inferno produced no smoke in spite of its size and scale. Not only that, but the flames never ventured beyond the monolith, as if it had some extraordinary level of intelligence and control over its own spread. This fire was meant solely for the monolith, and the monolith only.

The sound of fast approaching footsteps causes Loona to recoil and prepare herself for another fight, spinning herself around and finding that it was only Jim, linking up with her in a light jog. “Loona! Loona!!” Jim called out as he slowed down, slinging his rifle over his shoulder; “God sakes, are you alright?!”

“Y-Yeah, I’m okay…” Loona weakly nods as she finally catches her breath, bending over to rest her hands on her forelegs in exhaustion; “I-I’m okay, I’m fine… oh shit… o-oh shit, did I just do all that? Did that actually happen??”

“I-I can’t believe it myself…” Jim openly admitted, letting out a half chuckle of disbelief and fatigue; “Is it… Is it all over? Is that it, are we done??”

“…I don’t know,” Loona shook her head again, turning her head back towards the raging fire consuming the monolith; “I guess so? I-I mean, I hope so…” That’s when Loona thought to look towards the space where Malloy had landed after tossing him aside… but he was nowhere to be seen; “…What the hell..?”

“What?” Jim asked, turning his eyes roughly where Loona was looking to see exactly what she was seeing — nothing.

“Where is he?” Loona asked with growing concern in her voice; “Where the fuck’s Malloy??”

“OVAH HERE, YA MUTT!!”

All eyes turned towards the far left of the gargantuan chamber roughly where Loona found Stolas laying, finding yet another disturbing sight. There stood Malloy, his body battle-torn and far more disheveled than he had ever been before, his hunting knife clasped in his boney glove-veiled right hand, with his left now handless arm wrapped around the neck of his latest hostage; Stolas. The owl prince had since reverted to his regular form, looking far worse for wear; his clothes and feathers stained with his blood as he slipped in and out of consciousness. Loona let out a horrific, loud snarl as she readied herself for yet another round of fighting, getting down on all fours and arching her back with intent to pounce!

This didn’t deter Malloy, his face horribly disfigured from Loona’s earlier shot, who only cackled with rabid ferocity; “**HAHAAAA!!! OH YOU ENTERTAIN ME, THE BOTH OF YA!! NRRRFF, HAHA!!** Ya both fucked it, ya both really did… **ESPECIALLY YOU, *WOMAN*!!**

AND NOW, because of you…? …This birdman's gonna die… **I'LL MAKE YA WATCH HIM BLEED OU—"**

CRAK!!!

A silvery bullet whizzed through the air and pierced Malloy right through his shoulder, the force of which sent him toppling backwards and released Stolas from his headlock! Victor fell backwards with a heavy "THWUMP!" as weak, raspy breaths and harsh blood-filled coughs filled the air. Loona spun her head around to where the shot had come from, finding none other than Vasily Antonov with Malloy's blessed lever-action rifle, the middle-aged Russian still aiming down its sights.

In a brisk march, Vasily approached Jim as he pulled back the reloading mechanism, allowing the spent blessed cartridge to spill out. Without any hesitation, the broad-shouldered private investigator handed it to Jim; "Take this," he said bluntly; "I'll let you do the honors. Finish him off, there's only one left."

A sober look appeared in Jim's eyes as he accepted the offer, plucking the rifle out of Vasily's hands. He nodded silently to the man who was decades his senior, then turned his head to face Loona, giving her much the same weary yet serious look. Then, with lever-action in hand, Jim made his way to finish the job.

Before Loona's mind could go astray from the present, as much as it wanted to, she turned her attention back towards the owl prince still slumped to the floor. The hellhound ran swiftly to him and landed on her knees beside him, immediately supporting his head with as soft a hand she could muster. In a sweat, Loona spoke to him; "Stolas? Stolas, can you hear me?? Hey come on, wake up for me!"

"Mmmrgh…" Stolas faintly groaned in exhaustion and agony, his eyes fluttering open again and began looking around through heavy eyelids; "Wh— y-you're… what… wh-where am I? W-What is.. What..?"

"Hey-hey, don't stress yourself out," Loona hushed him; "I'm gonna get you outta here, okay? It's over."

CRAK!!! — The sound of Jim finishing Malloy off slapped Loona and Stolas in the ears, causing the poorly prince to flinch in fright and pain. Loona shushed him before further asking; "Do you

think you can stand?"

"…Nnffh, I… a-argh, I think so…" Stolas squeaked in a weakened, soft voice, his arms shaking as he tried to support himself upright; "Help me up, p-please…"

Loona obliged by Stolas' request, hoisting his arm over her shoulders and slowly stood up in tandem with him, taking care not to stand up too fast. It took longer than expected, but before too long, the badly beaten goetia was able to find sure footing and support his own weight, albeit using the hellhound as his temporary crutch in case he fell.

"Come on! Let's get outta here!" Vasily called out to the newfound exhausted party of four; "There's a tunnel leading up to the surface, it's just over here!"

"The surface??" Loona was genuinely confused.

"We're underground at the moment," Vasily informed with his voice echoing throughout the 'anti-sanctum', the sound of debris falling to the ground from the burning monolith interrupting his voice; "Best guess is that we're at least thirty feet below the surface. When we get up there, Loona… we both need to talk, one-on-one."

"…A-Alright," Loona agreed hesitantly, trudging behind Jim and Vasily with the injured Stolas. From the wreckage which the owl prince had caused in his hypnotic state, a slope made out of the ruined platform led up to one of the tunnels from the ground floor. The makeshift slope groaned under the combined weight of Loona and Stolas as they slogged up towards the tunnel mouth, with Jim making sure that they didn't fall on the way up.

When Loona finally reached the top, she looked back towards the crumbling Monolith and where Malloy's now thankfully lifeless corpse lay, his head now completely decimated from Jim's finishing blow. Before Loona could glare at it for too long, a large flaming chunk of the monolith fell on top of the horrid cadaver, the impact making a loud "***BOOM!!***" as cinders and sparks flew in all sorts of directions like dust. Then, with an exhausted huff, Loona looked back into the tunnel and entered with Stolas by her side, making the liberating ascend upwards.

E Tenebris, Lux Interna

Like Dante Alighieri emerging from the tormented and unfathomable circles of Hades, the party of four emerged from the ascending tunnel and back out into the brisk moonlit night, the earlier thunderstorm having since subsided and given way to a star-filled sky. Where they had stepped out into was a clearing upon a summit, overlooking a tree-rich valley with a flowing rocky creek below, having emerged from the tunnel mouth which was cut into a small hill. Though the surrounding ancient trees obscured the moonlight high above them, the dew of raindrops glittered under the light which did shine through the olive green leaves overhead.

The liberating freshness of the open air blessed Loona's lungs as she broke through the tunnel mouth and out into the serenity of the forest, being embraced by the grass and dirt beneath her feet which was rich with dampness, and the purity of an elegant brisk night breeze. Loona looked out into the valley, finding a sense of inner peace as she did so — this view was a reward for surviving for so long, and against odds far greater than her. But now wasn't quite yet the time to rest; Stolas' uneasy balance upon her shoulders proved that fact. His weight felt near crushing as Loona sat him down against a nearby tree, giving both herself some time to recuperate as well as the owl prince.

"Nngh!!" Stolas winced as he slumped against the bark; "…Ouhh, it hurts… E-Everything hurts…"

Loona leant down in front of Stolas, checking over his body to assess his injuries. It seemed as though her battle against him did take a seismic toll against his body; his feathers in a mess and patches of them showing signs of being partially scorched. A look of intense fatigue lingered in Stolas' eyes as he tried to regain his focus, though at this point to little avail.

The hellhound was careful not to touch him in fear of exacerbating his injuries, merely observing him. She spoke fluently to him, making her words clear and concise; "Where does it hurt? Can you tell me where it hurts?"

"Just… Argh! E-Everywhere. Everything," Stolas whined, squeezing his eyes shut as he shifted himself in a more comfortable position; "Just… Please… D-Don't touch me anymore, please…"

The way that Stolas said this struck Loona with confusion. It sounded less like he was wishing not to be touched because of his current condition, but rather pleading that 'she' no longer touched him specifically. Loona couldn't help but ask; "Why? Does it hurt when I touch you?"

Stolas let out a deep shaky exhale as he tried to recover, his breath heavy from exhaustion. He finds the strength to respond to Loona's query; "There's… T-There's something wrong with you. … Something's… not quite right… Y-You have something you logically shouldn't have… Why do you have it..?"

Loona squinted with even more confusion; "What??" She didn't have time to think on Stolas' response, however, as she felt a set of eyes observing her from behind. The hellhound turned around to see Vasily watching her intently, his mind seemingly deep in thought about the strange woman he had come into contact with. Jim looked in the same general direction, his eyes alternating between Loona and the Russian standing directly beside him. Eventually Vasily raises his finger and crooked it a few times, signaling for the hellhound to come over.

Unsure of what his intentions were, Loona nonetheless obliged by the beckoning, nodding to the Russian before turning back to Stolas; "Just hang in there, okay? I'll be right back," she assured, before getting back up onto her feet and approaching the two men with a sober look on her face, understanding the sheer gravity of what had just unfolded. Upon reaching them, Loona remained silent, waiting for whatever Vasily had to say.

At first the man with a face as firm and indifferent as stone didn't utter a word, looking intently into Loona's scarlet eyes with a look of much ponderance and indecision. Then his eyes flick momentarily behind the canine-formed 'beast' towards the tall humanoid owl, analyzing him before refocusing on Loona. Finally he asks in his gruff voice; "And who is he?"

"Someone I know," Loona explained impromptu, having far from anticipated Stolas' presence herself; "He's not any harm to you, I promise. … Well, not anymore at least."

"…Sure," Vasily responded quietly, taking the hellhound's word at face value; "He said something about you just now, I heard him. What do you have?"

Loona couldn't help but furrowed her brow, clueless as to what she supposedly had as everyone kept telling her. She answers in kind, her voice indecisive; "I… I don't—"

"You should know," Vasily interrupted in a soft but straightforward tone, his response mimicking what his daughter had rebuked with. He continued; "There is something very extraordinary about you, but I'm hesitant to pinpoint it to one thing… because it should be impossible."

“And what’s that?” Loona asked while raising one eyebrow faintly, hoping to get a concrete answer after much guessing work in her own mind.

Much like the woman of hellish origin standing before her, Vasily was just as hesitant to express what the ‘thing’ was, if not more so. There was no denying the notion that something seismic and significant had unfolded; not in the events themselves, but the way that Loona had seemingly adapted to the situation at hand. This remarkable adaptation in turn opened up something inside the hellhound which hadn’t been opened within anything like her in an incredibly long time.

Eventually the silence was broken when Vasily spoke soberly; “…To be honest with you, I’m not entirely sure. I may know what it is, I can put names to it, but it’s near unfathomable that it could be assigned to you. I suppose it’s called a “**soul**”, one which by some miracle is in connection to what is right and good. Something’s burning within you, something which hasn’t been set alight in your kind for so long. … It’s why you didn’t burn along with your ‘associate’ over there.”

Loona blinks as she processes what was being said to her, finding it all difficult to believe herself. Was he really implying what she thought he was implying? It wasn’t as if there was any other explanation. But that’s impossible, it couldn’t be… could it?

Vasily continued unphased by Loona’s outward bafflement; “It’s also why you have my chetki in your pocket, but you aren’t harmed by it. By all logic, you shouldn’t be able to touch it, let alone approach it… but alas, here you are, with it in your possession.”

A sharp realization hit Loona which caused her to widen her eyes, looking down at her left pocket as she fished out the black prayer rope. The individual knots which made up the entire length of the holy artifact felt warm and strangely comforting in Loona’s hand, her pupils dilating with awe and solace as she stared at it. She began to fidget with it, inching the rope along her palm with her thumb which caused a light electric tingle in her hand, however the electrical current didn’t hurt. In fact, Loona couldn’t help but correlate the tingle to the feeling of being soothed by a delicate, nurturing hand. It felt divinely beautiful.

Before she could get too carried away with the ‘chetki’, Loona looked back up towards Vasily and carefully handed it back to him; “Here. I assume you’d be wanting this back.”

Vasily nodded silently as he gently took the prayer rope out of Loona’s hands, his rough old fingers embracing it as if it was an old friend. The Russian studied it for a few seconds like he was checking for any discrepancies, humming once to himself before looking back up towards the hellhound; “Mm. Untouched. You surely kept it safe, didn’t you?”

“I mean, I tried to,” Loona shrugged, though her tone was still serious and acknowledged the intensity of the situation; “Something told me I should.”

“You did well…” Vasily congratulated in a trailing-off voice, kissing the prayer rope gently before slipping it back into the depths of his own coat pocket. The middle-aged man of faith craned his head upwards into the night sky, gazing up at the countless stars which flickered above them like mesmerizing fairy lights — or perhaps, they were an audience of archangels looking down upon the earth, silently observing the deed which was done. After momentarily getting blissfully lost in the God-given galaxy above him, he sniffed and pinched his brow, lowering his head down towards the ground he stood upon and scuffed the toe of his boot against the dirt.

With his hands balled into a fist and perched upon his hips, Vasily looked back up at Loona and said; “Alright, this is what’s going to happen. You’re gonna have to agree to this, okay?”

Loona nodded her head compliantly; “Got it.”

Vasily cleared his throat before continuing; “So this is what will happen; we’ll part ways from here. I’ll take Mister Steele here back into town, say that everything’s fine and that he’s safe, and the culprits have been detained or whatnot, or they died in a mass suicide — I’ll make something up, don’t worry. He may have to go to hospital for medical evaluation though, because, well, health and safety concerns.”

“Right. And how long will he be in there for?” Loona asked.

“I’m not sure of the exact details. Maybe up to a week? A few days?” Vasily made a rough estimate; “Anyhow, I’ll continue. In addition to that, I’ll also absolve all charges and suspicions against you, including the assault you inflicted against those officers. I’ll convince Senior Constable Pearson to do so.”

“It wasn’t “assault”, but okay, sure…” Loona mumbled to herself, rolling her eyes; “Alright, that all sounds good. Hey, uh, before you do leave, can I talk to Jim? Just for two minutes.”

At first, Vasily appeared to react somewhat hesitantly to the request, his entire body freezing as he stared ponderously at Loona. This hesitancy didn’t last long as he finally gave in, responding with a simple; “You may.”

“Thank you,” Loona expressed in a sincere way, turning her attention towards Jim who stood a few feet behind the Russian. The hellhound let off a small, approachable smile before greeting the young man; “Hey.”

“Hey,” Jim replied in kind, returning the faint smile with one of his own.

Loona let out a sigh of fatigue from it all before inquiring sincerely; “How are you feeling?”

Jim shrugs as he briefly scratches his right cheek; “Fine. I’m alive, aren’t I? Thank Christ…”

“Hah. Yeah, literally,” the hellhound agreed to the sentiment, her smile fading a little as she asked; “Will you be okay?”

“Ah, I’m sure I will be,” the tired bushman assured, then returning the kind inquiry with a ‘return-to-sender’; “What about you?”

Loona shrugged it off as she had done so, a stoic attitude which had helped her survive for so long; “Meh, it’s only a few cuts and bruises. It’s nothing I can’t recover from, all I need is just some sleep. …Yawn!— Mmmrgh, I’m tired as fuck…”

“Yeah, too right. Go home and get some sleep then, yeah?” Jim commented, gently patting Loona’s shoulder in which he was mindful of the wounds she had sustained, especially the one covered by the makeshift tourniquet. Then came a thought which crossed his mind, one which he entertained; “Hey, uh… Yeah nah, look, I understand you’re not big on them, but… shit, before we part ways, can I hold ya?”

The unthinkable question had just been asked. In response, Loona blinked as she held onto the question, considering its contents deeply. For the longest time she had been vehemently against any mutual physical contact, practically forcing herself to accept them; especially with Blitz’s impulsive and uninvited “hugs”. But this was Jim, a man who not only respected her, but who she respected in return. And thus, with this in mind, Loona smiled and nodded, then opened her arms invitingly.

Both the human and hellhound bought each other close into a wholehearted, enthusiastic hug. Loona hugged the hardest, wrapping her fur-covered arms right around Jim, her hands flat against his oilskin-coat-covered back. The mutually reposeful embrace lasted longer than expected, but eventually Loona and Jim eased out of it, stepping back a little from one another for personal space.

This time, Loona was the one to speak; “Well… I guess this is it, then? Goodbye?”

Jim’s head broke into a faint nod; “For now. Until we meet again, huh?”

The hellhound’s soft smile turned into a somber partial grin, as if parting ways at this time was physically hard for her to accept. Loona finally squeaked in response; “Y-Yeah. Until we do. I’ll know where to find you, right?”

“Oh, I don’t reckon I’ll ever move out from that old dunga,” Jim chuckled, referring to his house in a self-depreciating way. He added one final thing; “…I’ll miss you, yanno?”

“…I’ll miss you too,” Loona admitted to her own surprise, the words tumbling out of her mouth in a near subconscious fashion.

The pair of them fell into a tranquil and exhausted silence, unsure of what else to say which hadn’t already been said, both of their minds mutual in wanting to stick together, though the time was right to part ways. Circumstances are usually like that; staunchly cold and indifferent with what camaraderie might’ve formed, and more often than not a causation for old friends to go separate directions, even if it was only for the time being.

Then, before too long, Jim broke the silence; “See ya on, Loona. Please stay safe.”

“Yeah,” Loona softly smiled, giving the human a firm pat on the shoulder as a gesture of one final physical farewell; “I’ll see you on.”

For one last time on this nightmarish journey of unfathomable misery and strife, Loona, Jim, and Vasily had a moment to acknowledge one another, their eyes holding an understanding of each of their respective struggles which they faced. Then finally, Vasily nodded to Loona and led Jim back through the wilderness, seeming to have a clear understanding as to where he was heading. Before

he could get too deep into the thicket, Vasily stopped and turned around, seeming as though he had thought to say one final thing.

Sure enough, that ‘final thing’ came; “Do something with that burning heart of yours! Look into it!”

“I… I will!” Loona called out in return, though she had no clue as to what he meant — a ‘**burning heart**’? What was with everyone and cryptic messages lately? Regardless of the sudden message, the hellhound watched as the two men vanished into the trees, watching until they were too submerged within the treeline to spot.

The sound of Stolas wincing in pain snapped Loona’s attention back to her latest task, getting the owl prince back home. With as sure footing as Vasily navigating the thicket, Loona rushed back over to Stolas and aided him, bending down once more and assuring; “Hang in there for me, okay? I’m getting you out of here.”

Try as Loona might to communicate with him, Stolas didn’t reply, obviously far too weak to respond in any meaningful way. Her mind was now steadfastly focused on delivering the goetia back home in one piece, fishing her phone out of her battle-weary jacket’s pocket, discovering that previously unbeknownst to her that none other than Octavia had frantically been trying to call. Loona’s eyes switch between the poorly yet stable Stolas and her phone screen, connecting two-and-two together in her head with a pained sneer on her face, before then at last returning the plentiful missed calls. It was barely two seconds after Loona had raised the phone to her ear when Octavia picked up.

The hellhound spoke clearly; “Hello, Via?? … Yeah, I’m here! … Yes, it’s Loona, it’s me! Wait just —... Via, calm down a little and listen for me, I found him! … Your dad! He’s here with me! … Honestly I don’t know, we’re in the middle of this forest at the moment. … Yyyyeah, I think he’s okay, just a little beaten up. … Yeah I know, Via, I’m so sorry this happened. Look, I’m really sorry for not picking up earlier, I was literally fending for my life. I-It’s all over now. … Yeah, the thing we talked about. … Alright, just hang in there for me, okay? I’ll bring him home. I’ll call you back when I’m close.”

The call ended shortly after, a dull two-noted ‘beep’ sounding off when Loona hung up. One call was out of the way, and now was the time to make another; her ticket home. She went to her contacts list just a tab away and scrolled upwards under the category of ‘B’, finding Blitz’s name, her thumb now hovering over the call button. But before she could commit to calling, Loona froze; something just outside of her peripheral vision across the other side of the valley had caught her attention. The hellhound looked up, fearing that whatever this was would be as inexplicable and

potentially life-threatening as everything else she had been through. Whatever expectation Loona did have, however, was succeeded and pacified by what she found.

Across the dip in the terrain, and atop the adjacent ridge which was equal in height to the one Loona stood on, was another small clearing; and in this clearing, stood something prominent. There, standing unmoving and akin to a sculpted granite monument, was a man on horseback, illuminated by the moonlight. The man in question looked tall as he sat upright and alert on his black steed, and although exact features were hard to make out on account of him looking more akin to a silhouette, the papakha which sat atop his head and the sheathed sword hanging by his side was a dead giveaway to his lone observer as to who this might've been. Loona stared alertly at the figure across the valley, unsure of what exactly to do or say, and without a clue as to what he might've wanted from her. At a loss of what else to do, the hellhound did the one thing she could; she hesitantly raised her right hand towards the silhouette, acknowledging his presence. To her surprise, the figure responded. In a slow and non-threatening manner, the figure unsheathed his sword and raised it above his head, the remarkable silver blade flickering under the moonlight — it was a solemn gesture of recognition, of respect. Then, with nothing said and all done, the cossack returned his sword to its holster, steered his great broad-shouldered horse around, and rode off out of sight.

"LOOOOOONIEEEEE!!!"

A shrill voice frightened Loona so much that she jumped and spun around, gazing wide-eyed into the treeline behind her! The disturbed rustling of foliage got ever closer as the voice kept bellowing, calling her name: "I'm here sweetheart!! Don't worry, daddy's here!! Loonie!! STAY WHERE YOU ARE, PUMPKIN , I'M COMING!!!"

Bursting through the treeline and down the hill into the clearing was Blitz, frantically screaming and no doubt ready to kill anyone who stood in his way! The imp nearly trips over himself as he ran towards Loona in desperation to relink with his daughter. Without warning, Blitz pounces with his arms outstretched to hug her, only for Loona to block the hug by holding him back by the shoulders, grabbing him firmly so he wouldn't fall to the ground.

The hellhound's resistance was futile as Blitz slipped out of her grip and hugged her tightly with tears in his eyes; "YOU'RE OKAY!! THANK FUCK YOU'RE OKAY!! Christ on a stick, I thought I lost you!!"

"Nnngh! I-I'm fine, Blitz, just— argh! Knock it off, you're crushing me!" Loona protested loudly, managing to pry the imp off and plop him back to the ground on his feet like a cat; "Besides, we got bigger problems," she continued, gesturing her hand towards Stolas.

Blitz turned around and gawked in awe at the state that the prince was in; “Wh– Stolas?! What the Hell’s he doing here?? Wait, is he… is he hurt?! I didn’t even know that he could—”

“Yeah, well he is,” Loona interrupted with no mood to hang around much longer; “Come on, we gotta get him home.” Taking the grimoire out of Blitz’s hands, the hellhound flips open the book and summons a portal before them; “You’re gonna have to help carry him through, I can’t touch him.”

Blitz, understandably, raised an eyebrow in confusion; “Excuse me, what? Why??”

“I just… I just can’t,” Loona explained, the tone of her voice dipping from that of bluntness to that of in-depth pensiveness.

“Oh that’s just great, Loonie! Force me to do the heavy-lifting while—”

“BLITZ. Listen to me. I can’t touch him!” Loona snapped, repeating her stance with emphasis; “Let’s just get him back, make sure he’s fine, and then leave! …I just want to go home.”

Seeing the exhausted and serious look deep within Loona’s eyes made Blitz cease from pursuing the source of her reluctance, taking it upon himself to hoist Stolas back onto his feet and support him through the portal. Loona followed closely behind, grimoire in hand, with one thing on her mind — she had some thinking to do.

(Act V) A Courtesy Call

A four-foot pedestal fan hummed a low, monotonous buzz as the spinning blades scanned the room in a slow, methodical sweep. The bedroom's lone occupant lay completely flat against her bed, her arms and legs lying stagnant as they rested comfortably against the mattress. Her phone, which was halfway charged and loitering around the "fifty-percent" mark, too laid beside her, its screen facing upwards towards the ceiling, much like its owner. The ceiling light was turned down to a minimum setting so that the occupant wouldn't blind herself as she stared off into space, her eyes locked onto an unspecified spot in the ceiling which she paid no real mind to.

Four days. It had only been four long, solitary days since the nightmare ended, though the return to normal felt like an eternity of numbing isolation. Though of course she wasn't isolated in the literal sense, Loona felt as though she had entered into a period of mental seclusion, one which she hadn't experienced the likes of ever before. Now it wasn't as if the hellhound was depressed, in fact she was far from it; it had more to do with the fact that her mind — that little biological automaton which had helped her survive and stay sane — was full of thoughts. It was one deeply impactful thought after another, reflecting on the things she had learnt over the two weeks or so she had to endure, struggling on for her own survival, and Jim's. Most of these thoughts consisted of questions of "How did she survive all that?", and many other related silent inquiries which stirred in her head which, to Loona's utmost frustration, had no obvious answer. In fact, 'thinking' was pretty much all that Loona had been doing for half the week; her already closed-off approach towards her coworkers intensified to whole new levels, even to the point where a simple 'hello' would startle her.

One provocative thought, in the form of a question, stood out to her in particular; What did Vasily mean by a "Burning Heart"? Though Loona had already figured that the consensus was that she now apparently had a 'soul', the concept of her so-called "Burning Heart" felt like something in conjunction with the realms of 'souls', yet an entirely different thing altogether — in other words, a concept within a concept. It had been nagging Loona ever since the Russian dared say it, the concept at this point in the week turning out to be an obsession, one which she quickly became defensive of and had now affected her work life.

Just the previous day, when Moxxie had returned from yet another hit job, the imp had caught Loona at her post intently looking at the desktop screen. Intrigued by the hellhound's apparent newfound commitment to her job as IMP's receptionist, Moxxie decided to comment on it, to which Loona jumped in her seat as if she was startled by his intrusion. Because of this odd reaction from her, the imp's commending attitude to the hellhound quickly turned into that of suspicion, coming to the conclusion that he had caught her "in the act", so to speak. This prompted Moxxie, with a provocative smirk, to investigate, orbiting the front desk to glance at the screen, only for Loona to strike at him, pinning the imp to the ground and snarled angrily at him like a wild animal, then smacking him across the face with a closed fist! This led to a bigger than usual scuffle between them, one which became very physical, and ended with a few scuff marks and an intense feeling lingering in the air like a potent aroma. After prying Loona off his employee, Blitz told his

daughter very emphatically to step outside, a direction which despite her hatred of being told what to do, the aggravated hellhound gladly did. With the proverbial “bomb” now defused, Blitz took it upon himself to investigate just what in Hell’s name had caused Loona, who was already usually defensive, to become even more so to an irrational extent.

If the imp CEO had sought answers from what was displayed on the desktop screen, his hopes were fruitless, as what he found only led to more questions than answers. Instead of finding something along the lines of things which were explicitly horny in nature, as a perverted part of himself expected, he found, sitting idly in the search bar, a question: “What is a Burning Heart”. Blitz raised one brow in confusion, moving his mouse to the search bar and clicking it, revealing far more stranger results. As it turns out, Loona had been searching up variations of the same question, the ‘search history’ proving that the topic of whatever a “burning heart” is, was searched for no less than twelve different times, if not more:

“Burning Heart”

“The meaning of a Burning Heart”

“Philosophy of a Burning Heart”

“Burning Heart definition”

“Burning Heart meaning”

“Burning Heart meaning NOT sex context”

“What is a Burning Heart”

It was the same sort of question, searched time and time again, with Loona evidently hunting for the answer with relentless fanaticism, evidently with little desired result. Like the father that he was, Blitz became concerned, seeing how the idea of whatever-the-fuck this “burning of hearts” was affected his daughter on a deeply emotional level.

Upon returning home that day, Blitz decided to have a talk with Loona to come to an understanding of what exactly was bothering her, so much so that it made her obsessed. Much like his investigation into the desktop at IMP headquarters, his attempts at coming to an understanding with his daughter also proved rewardless. Upon asking her about it, Loona wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of a straightforward answer, only replying with a simple yet heartfelt; “You wouldn’t get it. None of you would.” This summoned the question within Blitz’s own mind — Get what? What was there to get? With no appetite within himself to deal with Loona’s obsession at work any longer, Blitz ordered her to stay home until she ‘got over it’. This was an order which the hellhound gladly accepted. And now, here she was; lying completely flat on her bed, staring up at the ceiling, pondering deeply to herself in a way she hadn’t ever done before.

Her bedroom acted as a meditative chamber of deep reflection as Loona lay there physically dormant, though mentally active. Perhaps it was at that moment she realized how philosophers must feel, pondering their own existence, morals, directions in life, and sense of belonging. And there was another thing; though she recognized that she was home, Loona didn't feel at "home" per se. Of course Hell was Loona's place of origin and where she lived; but with the knowledge that Lucifer was more than willing to toss aside her life in favor of Malloy's hubris and his own, as well as the evil which he entertained, though the hellhound was where she "belonged", she felt like an utter misfit. Truly, she began to feel as if she couldn't stand being ruled by someone who seldom cared for her health and safety, nor for those around her who she cared so dearly about. It made sense that the so-dubbed 'Father of Lies' wouldn't either; why else would he allow the hellhound adoption process to continue, knowing full well how cruel, uncaring, and flat-out indifferent it is to the suffering of those subject to it? And what of the Sins? Surely they knew of the daily sufferings and injustices done against those beneath them, so why do they too allow it to continue without pushback? Were they just as complicit, but complicit with a smile, with promises of temporary beauteous vices of escapism away from the misery which the masses would indulge in, only to then be thrown back into the proverbial 'deep-end' once the party was over? They treated her kind like cattle, and no doubt Lucifer saw hellhounds like her, who only wanted to feel love and acceptance, the exact same way. The thought angered her. As a matter of fact, Loona not only wanted nothing to do with Lucifer and his wretched, uncaring world; she wanted out. She wanted out, and 'out' is what she will get, even for just a few days. Yes, an outing — some time away. It would help Loona think about what she wanted to do. For now though, until she had the chance? More deep pondering.

The fan blew another gentle breeze through Loona's fur for the umpteenth time, the nurturing soft gust lasting until it departed from her when the mechanism continued its turning cycle. A drawn out and heavy sigh escaped the pensive hellhound's mouth, delicately shifting her hands to rest them upon her chest, then intertwining her idle fingers together. Another comforting sense of numbness washed over Loona as all the muscles in her body remained on standby, though this idleness wouldn't last for much longer as a thought crossed her mind. Unlike the other thoughts which she had been having on her extended leave from work, this one seemed to beckon her to move. And thus, with this emerging call to act and move for the first time in two hours, Loona hoisted her back up from the mattress and sat upright, then rubbing her eyes while a gentle yawn subconsciously left her gaping muzzle. It took no more than a few sluggish seconds for her to regain her bearings, swinging her legs off the bed and planting her feet to the floor, then at once standing up to arise from her idle state.

Loona blinked a few times as her vision recuperated itself, focus once more returning to her eyes and adjusted to the current dimness of the room. In a faint stumble, the room's owner crept over to the light switch which was fitted with an adjustable dimmer, her thumb and pointer finger meeting with the knob and turned it clockwise until it was halfway. Not too dim, but not too bright — just as Loona liked it. Emerging from the receded dimness into the all-covering overhead light was the contents of the hellhound's room; a handful of posters, her midnight-blue dresser, the mini fridge full of her secret stash of human world goods, her desk upon which sat her acoustic guitar and some music sheets, her cherished horse plush, so on and so forth. Amidst this realm which Loona had begun to realize wasn't all it was cracked up to be, there was her room. This was her own personal

sanctuary where she felt truly safe amongst it all, and she was much thankful for it, and for Blitz's generosity for letting her have it, despite his many flaws. Bar from a few others Loona knew, perhaps that crazy imp was one of the very few better people she knew in this literal hellhole.

Motivated by her slightly parched maw, Loona scooted her way over to the mini fridge, holding the door open as she grabbed herself a bottle of booze. She glanced at the bottle of 'Fireball Whiskey' she was about to ingest, grunting with indifference towards it as she popped open the lid. The potent scent of cinnamon-infused whiskey hit her nose and taste buds as she took a swig, the liquor washing down her throat which made the dryness instantaneously dissipate. Now instead of "burning hearts", Loona was now focusing on the blissful slight burning in her throat, a shudder washing over her, infused with the tangy taste of cinnamon. Loona took another intent glance at the bottle, sloshing the contents around nonchalantly as she gave herself the liberty of another pleasurable swig. The thirst which had driven her to drink had now vanished, allowing Loona to close the bottle back up and return it to its designated spot in the mini fridge.

When she turned around, Loona's eyes brushed over the horse plush sitting upright next to her pillows, its black button eyes shining faintly underneath the intensified light overhead. The hellhound's heart grew heavy with a yearning to embrace it, a feeling which she on any other day would find childish. Considering what she had gone through, Loona went against her usual judgment and decided to give herself some leeway; a small cuddle wouldn't hurt. Just one private instance to be "small" in a way, to have her guard down and to retreat to the stomach butterfly-conjuring feeling of self comfort. Loona's eyes never retracted from the plush while she returned to the childlike sanctuary of her bed, her footsteps shuffling across the floor in a slow and energy-drained walk absent of urgency.

The walk ended with a slump as Loona crashed her behind on the bed, crossed her legs and grabbed her plush with a delicate, careful hand, being mindful not to squeeze it too hard like it had a sentience of its own. What Loona did next was something so rare for her that it was near inexplicable; like a mother tending to her child, the weary hellhound began cradling the stuffed animal, holding it protectively in her arms up against her chest.

Then like a plea for guidance, Loona asked the stuffed animal in a hushed squeak; "What am I gonna do, huh? You got anything?"

Silence was the plush's answer as it dared not speak.

A crooked, weary smile was conjured on Loona's muzzle in response to the silence, snickering to herself; "Tss! Of course you won't answer. You're a plush… and I'm a massive idiot…"

Loona shook her head at herself in disbelief with what she was doing, and collapsed back onto her pillow with the plush snugly wrapped in her arms, shutting her weightful eyelids to alleviate the onset of a migraine. As much as it was healthy to ponder deeply, moderation too was a safeguard from becoming overwhelmed, a measure which Loona at last figured was needed in the form of some time for no thoughts whatsoever. The biological automaton which was the hellhound's brain began to wind down from its attempts at comprehension, at last transitioning into a dormant state as consciousness began to quieten and waver into a short yet sufficient period of much needed respite. Nothing could disturb the peace which Loona felt at that moment, her mind cleared and washed clean of trouble as she lay there with her eyes closed, her cherished plush snuggled up against her in a protective, attached way. This period of meditation didn't last too long as a faint disturbance emanated from outside, the sound of the front door opening and footsteps entering into Loona's apartment sanctuary caused her ears to prick up.

"Loonie-pie, I'm home!" It was Blitz. Of course, who else would it have been? His voice cooed; "Are you home, pumpkin? I bought us some foooood!"

That horribly tempting promise of ready-made takeout slop was enough for Loona to feel a delicate growling pang in her stomach. Goddamn that Blitz, he knew how to drag his daughter out from the secluded cave which she called her room, making her emerge like a lion from its mountain-top den. Loona groaned as she sluggishly got out of her bed, cracking away a knot in her neck with a grunt as she shuffled her way over to the door. Its hinges squeaked upon being opened, the outside world being revealed to her once more, finding Blitz dropping two plastic bags full of food atop the kitchen bench.

"You're home early," Loona half-mumbled while rubbing her eyes, glancing up at the wall clock, finding that it had only been three hours since the imp had left for work in the first place.

"Psh! Hell yeah, I am!" Blitz quipped; "No vengeance-filled schmucks today! Decided to close up shop, sent M&M home early too. Preeeetty sure we've got enough moolah to last the rest of the week, anyway! Gets those cock-suckling landlords off our back!"

"Uhh.. Okay. That's good," Loona nonchalantly commented, making her way over to investigate what grub the imp had brought in. Unfurling the crumpled bag and peering inside, she found two rectangular plastic containers which held within them two full servings of noodles, cooked meat of some description, all topped off with diced vegetables and marinated in a fine edible oil. Holy shit, did it look good.

With a shuffle in his step, Blitz slammed the fridge door shut after grabbing himself an ice-cold beer from the designated bar section inside, popping it open with one of his snaggle teeth which filled the air with a wispy carbonated hiss. The imp then grabbed a pair of forks from the kitchen

drawers and kindly handed one over to his daughter who accepted it, grabbing her own hot serving of lunch before making her way back towards her bedroom, no doubt for the purpose of more isolation.

But just before Loona could reach for the door handle, she's interrupted by Blitz's voice which had dulled down to a more serious tone; "Oh hey, uh, Loonie. Before you go back in, can I request something?"

Loona sighed as though she had been inconvenienced, cocking only her head back towards the imp; "Yeah, what?"

"Can I talk to you for a minute?" Blitz asked sincerely; "Come sit down with me."

"Why?" Loona asked, raising one eyebrow in suspicion to Blitz's true intentions.

"Just come sit down. Please?" The imp repeated himself, a tinge of troubledness resonating in the way he spoke. Blitz's voice sounded much unlike how he usually was, the way he conveyed himself in this instance sounding much more like a father concerned for his daughter than the over-boisterous and quick-tempered imp he almost always made himself out to be. In all honesty with herself, it surprised Loona.

Hesitation prevented Loona from making a decision for a moment in time, but sure enough she inched her hand away from the door and returned to Blitz who now sat upon his couch. The hellhound sat beside her father who was prodding his meal with the fork, twirling some of the noodles around it and consuming it with an almost distasteful slurp. A silence settled between them like dust as Blitz dared not speak, though Loona banished it by deciding to speak up herself; "So… what? What's there to talk about?" She asked, opening up her own plastic container full of steaming food.

Loona had prodded Blitz with the question just before he could take another bite, the fork hovering awkwardly before his gaping mouth as a singular noodle fell back into the container from whence it came. His eyes shifted with hesitancy for as long he thought on what to say, indecision on the manner he should go about speaking in affecting his ability to convey himself.

Then, before Loona waited too long and with a look of worry in his eyes, Blitz finally initiated "the talk"; "Okay, so. I've been thinking about what you said yesterday, the whole 'none of us being able to understand' thing. … I want to understand."

“Yeah, well… You won’t. None of you would understand, trust me,” Loona abruptly answered, locking her eyes firmly onto the food she had just taken a bite out of, the oily yet satiable taste greeting her taste buds.

Satisfied with this answer, Blitz was most certainly not. He reaffirmed his willingness; “But I want to. Sweetheart, please, I’m your father. You have to explain these things to me so I *can* understand. What is it?”

This time, Loona didn’t entertain Blitz with an answer. She remained silent and self-contained, poking at her food and consuming a second mouthful of steamed vegetables and meat with a slow, silent swallow. Nothing was going to shake the troubled hellhound’s conviction that she was alone in the point of view which had developed as an aftermath.

Contrary to this, Blitz pressed again; “Is it something you saw—”

“Let me explain something very clearly to you, Blitz,” Loona broke her short-lived silence, staring down at her food with an empty expression in her eyes; “I don’t want to goddamn talk about it! Out of all people, I at least expected you to know what it feels like to not want to talk about shit! You hardly talk to me about your stuff, so why should I be any different??”

“Because I know what it feels like to be alone!” Blitz exclaimed; “You obviously need someone to talk to with what you’ve seen, so let me hear it. Please dearest, let me help you!”

Loona broke into a brief uneasy guffaw, running her fingers through her untidy mane of hair; “Help me?? How the hell are you going to help me?! And with what exactly, the fact that Lucifer was more than willing to have me killed?!”

“…I’m sorry, what??”

“There you go, I said it! You heard me!” Loona cried with frustration and anger in her eyes, though not directed at Blitz per se; “You wanted to know what was bothering me, and now you heard it! He was going to allow me to die, Blitz — To DIE, and he gladly allowed it too! This whole piece-of-shit world he rules over is one big, fat, massive lie where we all suffer! And there’s Lucifer, sitting on his ass as he wilfully does nothing to help us — NOTHING!! In fact, no, Lucifer probably LOVES watching us suffer, he feeds off it like the goddamn heartless bastard that he is!!”

A flicker of shock, disbelief, and anger rang out simultaneously in Blitz's eyes as he heard Loona's confession loud and clear, daring not to interrupt his daughter's emphatic and heartfelt exclamations. For Blitz, this was his time to shine and prove that he could be a good listener when the need arose, especially to support his greatly burdened daughter. Truly it hurt the imp greatly to see and hear the hellhound devolve into the state which she was in, sounding as though all the anguish and resentment of the world was entirely on her shoulders, its horrible grotesque talons gashing into her as punishment for the heinous crime of 'knowledge'.

Stress and pain shone in Loona's entire face as she ran her fingers through her disorganized mane of hair once again. Her inability to comprehend why things had turned out the way they did and what for, but more especially 'why her', stressed her out more than anything — what had she done to deserve it, to be betrayed by the 'Father of Lies', a man who she never once met in her life! What wrong had she done, other than knowing of his gravest treachery against her?!

Then came Loona's most heartbreaking confession, her voice no longer raised but dampened to a pitiful whimper; "I know this sounds stupid for me to say, but it's the truth. … I feel like I don't belong here anymore, down here. Like sure, this is where I live and shit, but… I don't know, nevermind. You wanted to know what was bothering me? Well there you go, now you know."

The silence lingering in the air between daughter and father was putrid, if not nauseating, as the dreadful truth of what Loona was feeling seeped into the walls and settled. If what she had confessed was said in a far more public setting in the outside world, out there with all those demons listening in, there would've been a riot; Blitz knew this, and thus treated Loona's word with utmost caution and respected its private nature. Then he asked, quiet and sincerely in a sober voice; "So… where do we go from here? What do you want to do?"

"…I want out, dad," Loona squeaked, turning her weary eyes to look into Blitz's own; "I can't stand it."

Blitz shrugged; "But where's there to go? What, are you saying you want to… leave Hell??"

"I don't know yet," Loona shook her head pensively; "That's what I've gotta figure out. Maybe I do, maybe I don't. It's probably hopeless."

"Hey-hey, no. Loonie-pie, you listen to me," Blitz beckoned, lightly pointing a finger at Loona; "Don't go thinking anything's hopeless, alright? Don't go do that, ending up like me. You wanna

know who's actually hopeless? Lucifer. I mean, come on, look at that shitkicker! Him and his stupid motherfucking grin and his tacky clothes, I say fuck that asshole! Unlike that loner cumrag, YOU'VE got people here for you — you've got me. I'll support anything you want to do, I promise. … You know that, right?"

Although the appearance of it was so delicately faint and brittle, for the first time since the beginning of her talk, a flicker of hope sparked in her otherwise troubled eyes; "Anything..?"

Blitz nods with a reaffirming smile, one which rarely came out for anyone; "Anything."

A significant assurance no doubt, one which Loona certainly needed in that moment. Though expressing gratitude wasn't the hellhound's speciality with most people, but despite this she smiled weakly at Blitz as non-verbal 'thank you', the smile fading as quickly as it appeared. A peaceful silence filled the air in contrast to the previous instance which felt tense and aggressive, with Loona returning to her meal and swallowing another small morsel of it. Before too long, Blitz piped up again; "So what's this whole "Burning Heart" bizz you've been looking up?"

"…Someone told me I had one, apparently," Loona informed in a ponderous voice. She shoveled another bit of steam vegetables and noodles in her mouth and chewed, saying with her mouth half-full; "I've been trying to figure out what it means."

Blitz's eyes narrowed with reservations, just as clueless as his daughter but with more of a 'suspicious' ring to it; "Uh-huh, uh-huh. And this bozo told you this, why? For what reason?"

Loona shrugged; "Beats me. He said I had one, so… I guess I'm looking for an answer now, whatever it is."

"Riiight… Can I just say one thing?"

"Sure. You're gonna say it anyway, I can't stop you," Loona obliged for the purpose of giving Blitz the 'go-ahead', then wiping her mouth from the excess marinating oil which she had now grown to thoroughly enjoy.

"Just be careful, okay?" Blitz warned in earnest; "Don't let people suck you into all of that 'self-questioning' and doubt horseshit. I don't even know who this guy… say this guy isn't—"

“NO, it isn’t Jim,” Loona groaned with a roll of the eyes, somehow knowing that her father would’ve bought up the bushman’s name at some point.

“Okay, okay, just making sure,” Blitz digressed, holding up his hand to show he didn’t mean anything by the assumption, before continuing with his sprinkle of life advice in case it had value; “I’m just saying not to get sucked into any of that self-destructive stuff. You know how people can try to play you like an idiot, right?”

“I’m fully aware. I’m not stupid,” Loona huffed, turning her head to look at the imp sitting idly beside her. Her abrupt and closed-off approach towards Blitz’s expressed concerns softened when she noticed the genuinely worried look in his eyes. Upon seeing this, Loona sighs and says in a softened manner; “Okay, look. Dad, listen to me. You don’t need to be worried about me being manipulated or some shit, ‘cause I’m not. This is genuinely how I feel.”

The solemn imp gazed deeply into his daughter’s eyes; “You promise?”

“I promise,” the hellhound replied sincerely, gazing right back as their eyes locked.

And so it was through the means of that genuine look from Loona that Blitz’s reservations about his daughter’s thoughts were quashed, and trust in knowing what she was doing was thus reinforced. Henceforth while the imp knew not fully of the context of the hellhound’s search, he had full yet cautious confidence that she would make a choice which was right for her. Loona knew of Blitz’s rejuvenated trust in her through the comforted look he gave, his eyes then turning back to his food as he commenced eating, all washed down with a so-called ‘healthy’ serving of chilled liquor. As the still pensive hellhound went back to eating her own meal, she sought this moment to be the right time to cease worrying. She figured if she did, outcomes in her favor which would help her come to a proper decision would eventually fall into place, sooner or later.

The question was now ‘when’, and in what form. Loona’s heart thumped vibrantly in her chest, each beat calm yet prominent — Or was it a different kind of ‘*heart*’?

“Try it again, Duncan!”

KRR-KRR-KRR-KRR—scrttch! … KRR-KRR-KRR-KRR-KRR-KRR—scrrtch!

"She won't start, Neil!"

"Ya sure??"

"Course I'm bloody sure, ya just heard it try to tick over!"

"Right.. Alright, hang on, we'll try something else."

"Nah-nah, Neil, listen! I'm telling you she needs a new starter motor!"

"Yeah nah, and I reckon she doesn't! Just hold ya bloody horses, I got an idea!"

A compounded amalgamation of determination, perseverance, and downright stubbornness motivated the beer-gutted police officer to hobble his way back into the station, leaving his far more physically capable and younger counterpart to sit idly by the faltering vehicle. Underneath the sandstone archway he passed and through the set of double-doors, swinging them open with both hands as he brisked towards the doorway leading deeper into the building. Soon as he steps foot inside, a heartily embracing warmth enveloped him, wholesome and far favorable in comparison to the unforgiving chill which lingered in the misty morning air outside.

Before the constable could advance much further in the search for his 'idea', the female officer sitting at her post by the front desk interrupted; "That car's not gonna start, Neil, I'm telling you from now."

"Is that how you're greetin' people this mornin', Sandra; with doubt?" The pot-gutted officer remarked, strolling his way up to the front desk and leaning himself against it.

The female officer shrugs; "I'm just being realistic about it. How's it going out there anyway?"

“Arghh, well, she’s stuffed…” ‘Neil’ reluctantly admitted in a slurred voice, perhaps finally coming to terms with the predicament; “I’m not admitting it, but yanno… I reckon the starter motor’s just about had it. May have to pop down to Supercheap, get a new one if they have it. I’m trying one more thing, though.”

“Yeah right,” ‘Sandra’ nodded before noting; “I mean that car’s had a good run, Neil. You’ve been driving it for, what, thirty years now? When’d ya buy it?”

“Nineteen-Ninety-Three,” ‘Neil’ corrected, then affirmed with confidence in his position; “What’s it matter anyhow, if it's thirty years old? I’m not getting rid of it, even if she was a-hundred. I’m telling ya, she’s a flamin’ good Commodore. She just needs a bitta extra time, that’s all.”

‘Sandra’ cocked her eyebrow; “On shift time, though?”

“Ahh, it’s not like anything’s happenin’ for the moment,” ‘Neil’ pointed out; “What do we do besides what we’re doin’ out there, piss about and waste away?”

“You could always help out with, oh shit I dunno, the paperwork?” ‘Sandra’ suggested with a faint emphasized flare on the last four syllables.

“Bah! Nah that’s Trevor’s job, Sandra,” the corpulent officer shrugged the suggestion off. As he had a passive look through the glass and over the desk, he noticed a blank sealed envelope resting atop the surface. ‘Neil’ couldn’t help but comment on it; “Writin’ love letters now, are ya?”

‘Sandra’ almost instantly knew what her colleague was referring to, rebuking; “Oh no, that isn’t mine. Remember that Russian that was with us for a couple of weeks?”

“Oh so he’s writing love letters, huh?” The rotund man remarked once more with a stupid grin, turning the quip into a running gag.

The “gag” fell on deaf ears, the female officer ignoring the comment and instead explaining; “He came in before you got here, just before he left back for Toowoomba. Said he wanted me to hold onto it for him, wants me to give it to someone.”

“And who’s that?”

Creeaak~

As if on cue, the sound of the old-fashioned entrance double-doors alerted the pair of officers to a new arrival, prompting them both to turn their collective attention back towards it. Standing in a slightly awkward and reserved fashion was a face which either of the on-duty personnel hadn’t forgotten too easily; a fair-skinned young woman, one who wore a crop top, a pair of shorts, black thigh-high socks, and had long remarkably silver hair. A black backpack was slung over her shoulder and seemed to be carrying a light load. Both sets of eyes locked firmly on Loona as she walked right in, awkwardly shuffling through the door and pausing, her own eyes set upon the two officers though with hesitancy to look them straight in the face.

Finally Loona forced herself to say in an ungainly delivery; “Uhh… hey there.”

“Yeah. Hey,” the hefty-stomached aging officer greeted flatly, his eyes just as critical and uninviting towards Loona as the delivery of his “greeting”. Though perhaps contributed to by the otherwise pleasant warmth of the interior, the intensity in the air had arisen suddenly like humidity before a calamitous thunderstorm.

Loona pursed her lips as she fidgeted her hands, tapping her fingers against both sides of her thighs. To break the silence, she drew out the words; “Hey, uhm… Are you guys familiar with a guy called “James”, or “Jim”, anything like that?”

“James Steele?” The portly officer spoke up; “Yeah, we’re aware of him. What about him?”

“I was hoping if I could find him,” Loona said casually approaching the front desk, “He went to a hospital, right?”

“That’s right,” The female officer confirmed, grabbing the envelope resting on the desk and handing it through the slot in the glass; “Vasily told you that, yeah? He wanted me to give you this.”

A look of curiosity appeared on Loona’s face as she looked at the white envelope like it was the strangest thing in the world. She asks to quench her confusion; “What is it?”

The female officer shrugged as Loona pulled the sealed envelope from her grasp; “He didn’t say anything about what’s in it, except that it was for someone who fits your description.”

“Huh…” Loona hummed with mild surprise and confusion, ripping the paper seal open which revealed, lo and behold, a letter contained inside. She pulled out the letter, carefully unfolded it in her hands, and thus began reading. It read as follows:

“To Loona,

I hope that you acquired this letter without much trouble to obtain it, and that Constable Sandra took note of my instruction and gave it to you. Do not ask yourself how I had the insight to write you this letter on the premonition that you would come, for I am asking myself the very same question — I suppose it came to me in a dream.

But that isn’t important. What is important is what I’m about to tell you: If indeed you have come to find Mister James Steele as I have suspected, then I am afraid that he is still in the hospital. However, as you are reading this, he is due to be discharged today. The problem is which hospital he’s located in — The public sector hospital located in Brisbane, which is roughly over an hour’s drive to the east.

Luckily for you, I have a solution — Mister Steele’s parents. For the time being until he is discharged from hospital, they are safekeeping his vehicle on their property, which in good news is only a ten-minute’s walk into town from the police station. Provided below is their address:

<u>10 Cratchit Street, Morrisvale</u>

Once you meet with his parents, inform them that “Mister Antonov” sent you, they will know who I am.

One last thing. I do hope that you have taken note of what I said to you that night — I’m sure you will know what that is. Look into yourself, and look carefully.

—Vasily Georgyvich Antonov"

"Hey, by the way, while you're reading that," Constable 'Neil' spoke with authority and a pointed firm finger; "Know this; Just because you're off the hook doesn't mean we don't have our eyes on ya. No more trouble from ya, ya hear? We're having none of it."

"I'll keep that in mind…" Loona heeded the warning, though she didn't take the officer's tone too lightly. And with all said and done, Loona turned around with her eyes analyzing the address, memorizing it in her head as she left the police station.

The morning crisp chill of the outside world greeted Loona as she made a sharp right and walked along the footpath into town, the warm sun on her shoulders providing alleviation from much of the cold. As foretold to her in the letter, Loona indeed had returned to Morrisvale on a premonition, much like Vasily's own. In contrast to the Russian's own foresight, hers was on the expectation that she would find Jim once again, and luckily it seemed that she would, albeit not without a bit of a drive. Before she knew it, Loona was already in the town center with enthusiasm about her step, the line shopfront verandas providing her with shelter away from much of the cold and the sun. As the disguised hellhound made headway through town, passing by locals, cars, and everything in between, the address rang out in her head like a bell, so as to be sure she wouldn't forget it.

10 Cratchit Street, 10 Cratchit Street, 10 Cratchit Street…

And so time passed as Loona advanced with no loss of stamina, making the most of each step as she cleared the town center, and into the midst of houses on spacious, green-grassed properties. Before too long the rather out-of-place frequent visitor came across an intersection, one which diverted to both the left and right of the road which she had walked alongside up until that point. A glance up at the street sign diverting to the right proved that Loona had arrived; "Cratchit St.," it read in bold black letters on a white background, the morning sun reflecting off the surface. 'Right' was where the sign was pointing, and so 'right' is where Loona headed, strolling eastwards along the footpath of this unsuspecting, peacefully silent street.

It didn't take Loona long to discover '10 Cratchit Street' as foretold in Vasily's premonitional letter. The address in question featured an old fashioned single-storey timber house painted a faded, sun bleached maroon, and a detached roller door garage to the house's left which was decades newer in outward appearance. The yard looked neatly trimmed and well kept, a welcoming sight accompanied by uniform shrubbery and hedging which seemed to be recently cut, at least judging by the small pile of branches in a corner beside the quaint and tidy veranda. Loona knew that her destination had been reached, and the only thing between her and the front door was the short white-painted timber gate and fence defining the boundaries of the aforementioned property. All the

peculiar frequent visitor to town needed to do now was to introduce herself to Jim's folks, that's if they were home — "Only one way to find out", Loona thought to herself.

Once she gathered her nerves, Loona crossed the street, invited herself through the gate, strolled along the neat gravel pathway lined with wondrous neat foliage, up onto the veranda, then up to the front door. The visitor knocks politely against the security screen door, one which guarded the main front door directly behind it: "Knock — Knock — Knock!" The security door rattles loudly with each knock Loona gives out against its surface, then pulling herself back one step in anticipation for someone to answer. For a moment she waited, though nobody came; complete stillness. Loona was just about to try again, only to then be stopped by the sound of the front door being unlocked, and sure enough it crept open to reveal a face. The face behind the screen door in question belonged to a woman, one who had wavy brunette hair which ventured no further than her shoulders, and a face which displayed telltale signs of being middle-aged.

Upon seeing Loona, the woman asks with a curious tone while intently analyzing the visitor, making her interest at the stranger's appearance rather obvious; "Can I help you?"

Loona blinks herself out of stagnation, answering promptly with a slight stammer; "O-Oh! Yeah, I hope you can. You're, uhh, Jim's mom, right? Yeah, no??"

The woman cocked her head at the stranger, the reserved confusion in her eyes growing slightly which prompted them to squint, wrinkles forming around her aged eyelids; "Yes. That's right, he's my son. Why's that, who are you to him?"

"Oh, I'm just a friend of his," Loona informed, forcing a bit of a grin on her face in spite of the discomfort she felt; "I'm sorry for bothering you, by the way. Mister Antonov sent me here to see you. … You know about him, right?"

Finally a look of recognition appeared in the woman's eyes, the squint she held fading as quickly as it appeared; "Ohh! The Russian, yeah? Yes, yes, I know about him. He did say someone would be coming around to see us..."

"Who is it, Catherine??" A booming, almost baritone masculine voice rang out from further inside the house, who Loona assumed to be 'Catherine's' husband, or more specifically Jim's father. By his blunt delivery, he sounded bothered yet vaguely curious, even if it meant interrupting whatever he might've been doing before Loona's intrusion into him and his wife's life.

“Just a visitor, Henry!” The woman called back, pivoting her head down the hallway towards what Loona assumed to be the living room; “She’s here to pick up Jim’s car, I think! … Is that right, Miss?”

“That’s the gist of it,” Loona confirmed promptly, maneuvering herself slightly to spy inside the house to satisfy her faint yet growing curiosity.

If Loona was aiming to be inconspicuous about her interest in the Steele residency’s interior, it was done with complete and utter failure, with ‘Catherine’ instantly noticing the newcomer’s curious mannerisms. This in turn was her cue to ask in a softened yet direct tone; “What’s the matter, dear, would you like to come in?”

“What? No-no, I’m fine! I’m just, uh… just looking, I guess,” Loona stuttered with great impromptu, having been caught completely off-guard by the invitation.

Try as Loona might to reject the invitation, the middle-aged Misses Steele seemed to ignore it. If anything, in a manner of speaking permitted by the beauteous art of language, she rejected the rejection; “Nonsense, dearie! Do come in, it’s awfully cold out there!”

“No seriously, I said I’m…” Just before Loona could allow her short temper to take over, she bit her tongue hard — this was Jim’s mother she was talking to. How could she go off all unbridled like that? She was better than that, at least she should be. Stifling herself, Loona let out a short sigh and capitulated; “…Alright, fine. I’ll come in. But I can’t stay around for long, okay? I gotta go get your son.”

“Oh we won’t keep you long, dear,” Jim’s mother assured, getting Loona to follow her inside into the depths of her abode; “Just enough time to warm yourself up from the chill. Look at you, you’re hardly dressed for it! Would you like a coat?”

“No, I’m good,” Loona was blunt to assert, holding the shoulder straps of her backpack with both hands. Though at first the half-expected visitor was reluctant to set foot inside, the pleasant warmth which lingered within the walls washed such hesitations away, enveloping Loona in a sense of relief and welcome.

It took the disguised hellhound no time at all to reach the living room where the heat emanated from, following closely behind Mrs. Steele as she pulled the backpack off her shoulders, holding it lazily by one of the straps close to the ground. Although she hung it blasé in her hand, Loona was

mindful not to let it collide or drag against the ground, for in it was her phone and the Grimoire; her responsibility and her ticket home. To let either become damaged would simultaneously kill her, figuratively and perhaps literally.

"Henry! Guests!!" 'Catherine' told the man lounging in his armchair with an almost scolding delivery, her teeth clenched together for the final syllable to emphasize that maybe he should stand up and become sociable.

At last, 'Henry' took heed of the matriarch's order, letting out a lazy groan and whinge as he lifted his hulking frame back up onto his shoe-cladded feet. Unlike his son, 'Henry' didn't overtake Loona's own height of exactly six feet, in fact he stood at approximate eye level with her. The man standing before his newest house guest sported a plain green shirt with the top two buttons undone, exposing a tuft of untidy black chest hair in contrast to his wrinkly, clean shaven mug. He wore a pair of beige trousers complete with a belt, along with his matching brown leather slip-on shoes, a pair of black socks exposed around his ankles where the legs of his casual slacks ended.

After stretching and acknowledging his wife with a smile, 'Henry' turns his attention to Loona with his curved lips turned into a slightly agape line of analytical indifference. Before too long, he asks his wife; "Streuth, Cat'! You never told me you'd be inviting people in for breakfast this mornin'. So this is the woman that surly bloke was on about, yeah?"

"Apparently, yes," Jim's mother confirmed with her husband, her voice soothing in comparison; "Now come on, don't be unsociable you big oaf! I've bought her in so she can warm herself up."

"Well I gotta know who I'm talkin' to," the patriarch remarked with a gravelly half-chuckle, then turning his attention back towards the visitor who stood there awkwardly. With a quick yet fumbling wit about him, 'Henry' asked Loona the first thing he could think of; "So, uh, what's ya name?"

The urge to utter the words "you don't deserve to know my name" as she had rehearsed with others over and over was almost overbearing, though on this occasion Loona knew there was a time and a place — today wasn't the right time. And so, with a feigned grin which looked just as awkward as she felt, the visitor revealed her name, albeit trying harder to force it out than she needed to; "…L-Loo-Loona?" she uttered, embarrassing herself with the self-inflicted stutter.

The patriarch repeated; "Loona?"

“Yep. That’s my name,” Loona continued to grin forcefully; “It’s.. nice to meet you?”

‘Henry’ took notice of Loona’s overbearing awkwardness in this impromptu “meet-and-greet”, his almost taken-aback expression showing that he had. He nodded his head slowly, then turned back towards his wife and asked with no effort to conceal it; “She’s a bit strange this one, isn’t she?”

This snaps Loona out of her spell of social tension, reeling back a little as if she had been offended. Her feign grin was hastily turned upside into a scowl; “Excuse me??”

“Oh come on, I didn’t mean nothing by it!” ‘Henry’ assured; “Here, come sit down with us! Know me better, woman!”

Though her face was still sourly disapproving towards Jim’s father, Loona quietly accepted his offer and went to sit down on a spare wooden chair, facing the pair of lounge chairs directly across from her. She watched as the married couple of a good few decades sat down in their respective places, the patriarch still having the reins in steering conversation; “So what brings you down here, hey? Coming to see us although we barely know ya?”

“Other than that ‘Mister Antonov’ telling me to come here… to be frank? I don’t know,” Loona admitted; “Guess I’m just here to pick up the car? Really I just came down this way to see your son, but obviously he isn’t out of the hospital yet. So, yeah, now I gotta play “errand girl” and pick him up.”

“Hrrgh, is that right?” ‘Henry’ uttered; “Well it doesn’t sound like you’re too enthusiastic about doing it.”

“No-no-no, I’m not saying I don’t want to!” Loona was quick to withdraw her comment, her forced nervous smile returning; “It’s fine, I can! Guess I just make smartass remarks like that sometimes, it’s a part of me.”

“Nah, no worries at all, don’t fret! We’re all a little like that,” the patriarch was sure to attest; “Just some more crass than others. Not saying you are, but yanno. So, like… you’re a friend of my son’s right?”

Loona nods rigidly; “That’s right,” she reaffirms, then accidentally letting a remark slip out; “Hey look at that, you’re learning.”

It was far too late for Loona to withdraw this second comment as the aging man let out a chesty laughing wheeze, reeling back in his chair as he began cackling; “HHHH—-HA—HAHAHAHAAAAA!!! Jesus, woman, you’re fucken good! You got a lotta wit about ya!”

“Uh… Thank you??” Loona squeaked out with hesitancy, not exactly sure if she was meant to take the elder’s guffawing entertained remark as a compliment.

After letting his enthusiastic throaty laughter die down, ‘Henry’ stifles himself back into composure, rigidizing his brow into a furrow line as he asks with a casually pointed finger; “So how’d you two meet anyhow? Ya don’t seem like the likelist of mates, yanno?”

“That’s to say the least…” Loona muttered to herself with a half-smirk, then giving a proper answer; “It’s a very long story, trust me. Whole bunch of circumstances rolled into one, and then I guess along the way we got to know each other, and now? I’m about to go pick his ass up from the hospital. By the way, how have you two been coping? As in, you know, with the whole thing with your son going missing and all that.”

This question of pure courtesy alone was enough to change the outwardly jovial and welcoming atmosphere into that of quiet and sober reflection. The dimming expression on both of Jim’s parents’ faces as they looked at eachother proved that the events of the past fortnight had affected them as much as it personally affected Loona. It seemed that Malloy’s disgusting, evil influence had no bounds, even after his final death.

A sense of shame overcame Loona as if she felt what she had inquired with was wrong on her part, urging her to utter; “Sorry. I probably shouldn’t have asked—”

“Nah, don’t worry about it. Ya didn’t say anything wrong,” ‘Henry’ was quick to assure; “It was hard on both of us, yanno? That whole thing. Catherine and I, we see Jim as really being our only child left. His sister died of some horrific condition which came suddenly, and his older brother’s a deadshit, as much as it pains us to admit it.” As the patriarch bestowed all of this information on Loona, his wife nodded along with a solemn expression which replicated her husband’s; “That boy, Paul. He barely visits us, comes and goes like a fart in the wind. Lord knows wherever the hell he is now, probably back on the hard stuff down in some mucky street in Adelaide or Hobart.”

“Ah. Mhm, y-yeah,” Loona grimaced faintly upon hearing this about Paul, for she knew of his fate and ‘wherever the hell’ he was now — probably.

‘Henry’ was about to continue recounting as much as he willed to Loona, though just as he opened his mouth, whatever chatter he was about to convey died instantaneously, promptly closing his mouth with his lips pursed into a thin line. Luckily the oppressive pause in conversation ceased when the matriarch took the chance to speak up, her legs crossed in the ankle-length sky blue dress she wore; “So what’s your plans after picking him up?”

“Well obviously I’m gonna bring him home. I reckon he’s had enough adventure,” Loona snickered with a light grin, fixing up a few strands of hair which had gone astray; “You folks gonna see him?”

“Oh, well it depends on how he feels, dear,” ‘Catherine’ considered; “But yes, we might be over. Will you stay long with him?”

Loona nodded as her hand gravitated towards her backpack resting by her side, propping it up on her lap as she prepared to head off; “That’s the plan. I’ll keep an eye on his health for you. But uh, yeah, speaking of, I should really get going. Don't wanna keep your son waiting for too long, you know?”

“Oh of course,” Jim’s mother agreed with a reemergence of enthusiasm and outright cordiality; “We won’t keep you much longer! It’s best you go pick him up now. Henry will hand the car over to you.”

The plan was alien and novel to Jim’s father who was physically taken by surprise and showed reluctance; “I will?”

“Yes, you old bean!” ‘Catherine’ thumped her husband’s shoulder, provoking him to stand up; “Go on, get the keys and lead her out. Quit being lazy, you’ve been doing it all morning!”

Loona snickered with a wide grin as she watched the hulking middle-aged man heave himself up from his lounge chair, then hauling herself up from her own seat in almost complete tandem and swinging the backpack over her shoulder. The aging gentleman escorted Loona back through the front door and off the veranda, making their way over to the garage on the tidy ballast path which led to it. A set of keys jingled in the man’s hand as he slotted it into the roller door, turning it counterclockwise with a mechanical “chnk!”, then retracting the door upwards with a metallic

rumbling sound, revealing the contents inside. Lo and behold, standing before Loona was Jim's Ute, in the exact same pristine condition as she remembered it.

"Aight, bare with me a moment. I'll just get her started and warmed up for ya," the senior Mister Steele told Loona, hobbling his way inside the garage with the car keys jingling in his rough old hand.

Observing the old man wrestle with the car to start it was akin to watching a rider attempt to coax his stubborn mule to shift forwards, the ignition turning over yet the engine refused to kick in. A mixed feeling of pity and entertainment washed over Loona as she watched Jim's old man swear and fuss, but sure enough, after all that trouble, the engine finally roared to life! With an audible shift in the gears, the gray pickup with many years on its belt crawled out from the garage, emerging into the sunlight like a bear from hibernation. The driver parked the vehicle right beside Loona and pulled the handbrake, allowing the engine to run on idle with a low purr as he stepped back out.

As he rounded the car to link back up with the houseguest, 'Henry' thought to ask; "You know how to drive a manual?"

"I got a grasp of it, yeah," Loona assured, rubbing her bare hands from the cold; "My dad's got one back home, lets me drive it every so often, or when I need to."

"Alright, bonza," 'Henry' remarked, then gestured towards the road and gave a short lecture; "When you pull out with her, don't put your foot too far down. Her engine's powerful and you can lose control if you're not careful."

"Yeah yeah, got it," Loona nodded along, before asking; "So which way's this 'Brisbane' place again?"

With his already gestured hand, Henry points to the north-east; "Just go through town here, past the police station, and keep driving along the main road. About a "K" out, there's a sign which reads "Brisbane Via Warrego Highway". Follow that sign, and eventually it'll spit ya out on the highway there. Make sure to turn right once ya get there, and from there it'll take ya straight into Brisbane."

Loona looks in the general direction of the north east, gathering her bearings for the long road ahead, hoping to herself that it would be uneventful and easygoing. Knowing her luck, the disguised hellhound wasn't too optimistic that exactly "nothing" would happen per se, but still —

she could only hope. And thus, with her destination now set and the car ready for driving, Loona nodded silently to Jim's father and went over to the driver's side, sliding herself into the car and slamming the door shut.

As she released the handbrake and shifted the pickup into its first gear, Loona heard Mister Steele call out to her one final time before departure; "Stay safe out there!"

"I will!" Loona promptly replied, holding up her hand to say farewell as she piloted the car out of the driveway, onto the street, and finally onto the main road.

A Friendship, Unbroken and Unfaltering

Mayhem — That was the very word to describe what Loona was now right in the midst of. As foretold by the direction that Jim's father, Henry, had given her, after roughly an hours-worth of driving tirelessly, the peaceful and quiet two-lane roads of Morrisvale and surrounds had given way to packed multi-lane highways with countless other drivers. The road signs indicating exit lanes and off-ramps had grown far more frequent as Loona drove, and the distance left to cover to arrive in "Brisbane" was steadily declining. At first the distance appeared as "115" kilometers, then "90", "60", "38", and now from the latest sign Loona had passed, the remaining distance appeared as no more than "5" measly kilometers to go. Of course, the shift from right-lane travel to left was a challenge which the disguised hellhound constantly battled against throughout the drive thus far, at numerous intervals almost running into other cars while attempting to merge — but she wouldn't mention that to anyone, for her pride and hide's sake. The morning sun gleamed on the hood of the car as Loona cruised ever eastwards, the drive having since provided her a sense of being refreshed, clearing her mind away from all of the reflection and indecision which had troubled her earlier. Hopefully, with the right circumstances and the right frame of mind, Loona would figure things out and come to the conclusions she so needed to. Maybe this drive, and this whole visit to the human realm in general, would give the pensive hellhound the clarity she so yearned for.

Just before she could begin daydreaming, a sign appeared which snapped her back to alertness. "Exit 5: South Brisbane via Royal Brisbane Hospital", the large green overhead sign read in big bold white letters, indicating that the upcoming left-shouldered exit lane was hers to take. A wave of relief flickered in Loona's mind, realizing that the long trip was within its last few miles — or in this case, "kilometers", something which she had seldom heard of before. Before she knew it, Loona had committed to taking the exit, slowing down drastically to a speed which was half of what she was doing as the vehicle glided along the off-ramp. A set of traffic lights set to 'red' followed not long after, causing Loona to slow to a stop before them as a slew of leisurely paced traffic rumbled by from right to left across the intersection. The lone driver saw this as an opportunity to take a breather, a moment to take in the newfound environment of the surrounding metropolitan, lowering her hands away from the steering wheel to give her arms some respite. Loona looked beyond the traffic and towards the skyscrapers off to the north, the tips of them just visible over the trees, powerlines, and residences of various ages and architectural styles which stood in the near distance.

The scene presented before the visitor to the 'overworld' felt so familiar, yet foreign. Now of course, Loona was no stranger to urban sprawl such as this, having spent much time in-and-out of it throughout her life, allowing her to gain "street smarts" which would help her to mingle and survive simultaneously. Though she lived most of her life in the midst of urban environments, she hated it. She hated the smells, the tastes, the aromas, the types of shady people that lived in it, the sketchiness of certain places, and so on. Combined together into an amalgamated abomination of uninviting feelings and senses, it all put Loona in a constant state of alert. Whilst the 'look' of the place the hellhound found herself in was vaguely similar, that's where the familiarities ended. The 'foreign' part of her verdict on "Brisbane", or pretty much the human world in general, was the feeling — The scenery, sure, it had its resemblances, at least to a certain limited extent. But the tension in the air which was found in Pride, and Wrath, and the likes… was nowhere to be felt. For

whatever reason, Loona didn't feel on edge on this Earthly plain as she would in hell, the instinct to 'survive' and stay reserved and alert was made redundant. She felt a peace, both inwards and outwards. Of course, Loona had visited the 'overworld' on quite a few occasions before, but in those instances she never took the time to notice just how tranquil it was in comparison to its 'underworld' counterpart. A new perspective had been opened to her, as if she had experienced a daunting revelation—

BEEEEP!!!

A rude awakening slapped Loona out of her daydreaming in the form of an impatient car horn! Instinctively the undercover hellhound looked up at the traffic lights to discover that they have since turned green, giving her path the right of way. Loona sneered at the impatient driver behind her which she glared at through the rear-view mirror, deciding not to retaliate as she got the vehicle moving again — "That asshole's lucky I got better things to do," Loona thought to herself with annoyance, the desire to bark right back in retaliation extreme yet controllable. The drive continued onwards, the day growing longer by the second and the traffic crawling along at a leisure's pace, and before too long Loona came across another intersection, this one featuring a built-in slip lane which allowed left turns away from the monotony of traffic lights. A sign was displayed alongside the slip lane, giving clarity to Loona's sense of direction: "**Royal Brisbane Hospital (500m)**", it heralded to all who passed by. The driver committed to the turn, gliding through at a slow pace before speeding up once the coast was clear.

After clearing the short slip lane, lo and behold in the near distance was Loona's destination. It was a large, four to five storeys high building painted mostly white, one which featured subsections jutting out on certain parts of the grounds it stood on, and large cutout metallic lettering painted a dark blue announced the name of the building they were plinthed on. Leading up to the main entrance lobby, a section made mostly of steel and glass, was a pathway decorated lavishly with bountiful organized flowers of red, yellow, purple, and white, as well as turf neatly trimmed and watered liberally, giving the greenery a 'shimmering' effect underneath the bright morning sun. It was all so calming, so peaceful; a scene which Loona felt as though she deserved to see.

She pulled into the driveway leading up to the carpark, slowing down to a crawl as she found a free spot directly in front of the footpath leading up to the hospital proper. Once she had parked the decades-old pickup into the spot and shut off the engine, Loona slumped back into her seat to give herself a breather, only now just noticing how tense her posture was — At last, the long trip was over. In a momentarily unfocused yet admiring gaze, the undercover hellhound looked out into the gardens decorating the sides of the pathway she would soon walk along, appreciating just how serene and rich with beauty it appeared, like a pocket of existence an entire world away from the cruel indifference of reality. The expression "heaven on earth" came to mind, though vanished when a pessimistic side of Loona's mind kicked in. "*This was a hospital. Only death and sadness lived here,*" it nagged, though Loona drowned it out. As the lone observer continued to stare out at the gardens, something near the vicinity of the pathway caught her eye. The 'something' in question was located off to the right of the path and looked to be a plaque of sorts, fixed to the

topside of a stone pedestal which was flanked on both sides by the same decorative foliage. Directly behind it was a small tree, one which looked to be recently planted, judging by the vertical supports it had strapped to the sides of the barely matured trunk.

Loona stared at the stone pedestal for a little longer than what was reasonable, in turn facilitating within her mind a sense of growing curiosity. Whether it was out of boredom, for the sake of it, or for something else entirely, Loona felt compelled enough to read it; so much so that it motivated her to hoist herself out of the car, which she locked after shutting the door behind her of course, then make her way along the path to investigate. The curious observer walked right up to the plaque and looked down upon it, and read what was engraved. Upon reading it, Loona's bland curiosity turned into that of genuine intrigue, finding the following passage:

"***Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled.***"

"Woah…" Loona subconsciously muttered to herself, far more taken aback by the words inscribed into the brass plaque than she had anticipated. Aside from not at all expecting that string of words to be molded onto the pedestal, in addition, she couldn't help but wonder why this was here in the first place, standing in one of the most unsuspecting places possible. And why did something inside her "throb" as she read it? So many questions with barely an inkling of an answer. Hopefully in due time, she would find one. For now though, Loona set it aside, turned back around towards the lobby entrance, and made her way up.

Walking through the glass sliding doors into this particular hospital felt to Loona more akin to stepping inside a hotel lobby, being left in a state of mild surprise at the relatively lavish interior decoration. Instead of chaos and haphazardness as Loona had half expected, she was met instead with orderliness and formality. Instead of a cacophony of noise and drama, there was light chatter amongst the people present in the lobby as nobody dared disturb the serenity. The lobby itself was decorated with indoor plants, couches and chairs made of silky velvet fabric which stood upon equally as pristine Persian carpet, two public water coolers strategically spaced on either side of the lobby's limits, and a white-tiled floor which was polished and tidy complimenting the entire scene. Off to Loona's immediate left was a front desk, along with two staff members dressed in their plain blue uniforms sitting idly behind it, waiting to serve whoever may come.

And so it was that Loona took the opportunity to talk to them, silently approaching the counter in a casual walk. One of the attendees, a brunette young woman with a tied back wolf cut, noticed Loona's presence before she even spoke, looking up from her computer and greeting with a simple; "Hey there! Can I help you?"

"Yeah, hey," Loona returned the greeting with a slightly feigned smile; "I hope you can, yeah. I'm just here to visit someone, his name's James Steele. Apparently he's supposed to be here. Is that

right, or…?"

"I'll have a look for you, one moment," the young woman replied with a slightly cheery voice, locking her eyes back onto the desktop screen. She slowly taps her fingers against the keys to type in Jim's full name, quietly browsing the results before uttering out a simple "aha!", then looking back up at Loona; "Uh, yep! He's still here. You'll find him in room 315 on floor three. Are you here to pick him up?"

"That's why I'm here, yeah," Loona confirmed with a brief nod of the head. Motivated by her unfamiliarity with the novel surroundings, Loona points a finger in the general direction of the elevators she had just discovered off to her right. She inquires; "So I just use those elevators down there to go up, right?"

The receptionist shifts her eyes to the left without moving her head, then looking back at Loona and rigidly nodding; "Uh.. yep, just those elevators down there. You use them to go up and down floors," she affirms with a hint of snark. The receptionist's smile became noticeably feigned, giving the newcomer the impression that the answer was sorely obvious through the rude 'know-it-all' look in her eyes.

"O-Oh, haha. Alright, gotcha. Sorry, really dumb question," Loona feignedly apologized with her smile becoming toothy and forced, sensing the receptionist's own snarky insincerity in the "reassurance" she gave her.

And with that, Loona pulled away from the front desk and briskly walked towards the elevators, remarking with repressed aggravation to herself about how much of a "smartass bitch" the receptionist was. Ultimately though, Loona came to the cold, hard conclusion of "fuck her"; she wasn't going to let some snarky little shit get in the way of her day, now was she? Let her be shitty, it's her funeral. At any rate, the widely irrelevant "incident" was out of sight and out of mind by the time the elevator doors opened for Loona, allowing her to step inside with a slow, casual stroll. The singular elevator occupant mashed the designated third floor button, watching patiently with her hands clasped loosely together as the doors rolled shut. Loona sighed as she felt the elevator ascend, brushing her hair back a bit to make herself look presentable, and at once she began to think. Not only did Loona think, she wondered — she wondered if it was even the right time to come, and if she should even be there in the first place, regardless of the letter which Vasily had the "hindsight" to address to her. And what of Jim? Did he even want to see her? Would her presence bring back bad memories, and ultimately be counterproductive in his recovery? So many questions to ask, but so little time for them to be answered.

"***LEVEL. THREE***," the flat and electronic female voice announced over the intercom as the elevator came to a stop, the doors rolling open with a light clatter shortly after. Loona walked right

out onto the blue-carpeted floor, rubbing her right hand over her left forearm as indecision on whether or not to see Jim began to overcome her decision-making. Regardless, the disguised hellhound pushed on, beginning to analyze the numbers of each room to find a starting point of where to look for “room 315”. It didn’t take long for Loona to find the starting point, taking note of the little label beside a particular closed room door — “301”, it read. And so she paced onwards, advancing slowly through the hallway and silently reading each label — “302”, “303”, “304”, “305”, “306”… Each step Loona took felt heavier and heavier as she began to feel growing anticipation, one which didn’t feel like dread or hope, but something in between. She continued counting — “310”, “311”, “312”.

Upon reading the next listed room number of “313”, Loona averted her eyes back up and further down the hallway, the urge to do so arising after having seen something that caught her eye. Only two rooms down was what the undercover hellhound assumed to be “315”, and standing guard on either side of the closed door were two stalwartly silent men, their hands clasped together in a closed-off stance. The pair of them were dressed sharply in a bright blue and white dress shirt respectively, both wearing long formal trousers and a pair of black dress shoes. Further displays of their individuality were shown in their features; the man to the left had a clean-shaven face with a left-parted fade hairstyle, whilst his counterpart to the right sported a brown beard, making up for the lack of hair atop his head.

Loona gulped a little as she looked at them, reluctantly making the decision to approach them further, walking cautiously yet casually towards “room 315” so as not to rouse too much suspicion. If Loona had expected the pair of apparent “bodyguards” to retaliate against her, that expectation was proven wrong. Instead, they both looked towards her with a poker-faced look and nodded, the man on the leftmost side greeting her with a low and reserved “good morning.”

“Morning,” Loona couldn’t help but reply back, her voice just as softly delivered. She raised her eyebrow and pointed towards what was apparently the door to Jim’s room; “Hey so, uh.. I don’t mean to be rude, but I’m here to see the man staying in this room here. C-Can I come in, or… what’s happening?”

“You a friend?” The clean-shaven man inquired, his accented tone sounded borderline demanding with coldly analytical eyes to match.

“Yeah, I am,” Loona was quick to state, growing even more eager to go see the room’s occupant; “So can I go see him?”

“Not yet,” the bodyguard replied, upfront with his refusal to grant permission just yet; “You must wait.”

Loona grew confused if not slightly concerned and asked; “Why? What’s going on, is everything ok??”

“Everything’s fine. He’s in a session at the moment. He won’t be too long now,” the bald gentleman piped up from Loona’s right, looking towards the room’s newest visitor without turning his head.

“A session?” Loona asked with even more confusion than before, then demanded; “Woah, okay! Hang on a minute, who even are you guys, what is this??”

The third party’s urgent inquiry wasn’t lost on the two men, who glanced at each other as though they were conversing without words. It was after they gave a mutual nod to each other when the bold and bearded man broke off from his post and leaned towards the door, giving it a swift rap. He called past the door; “Father? Father, are you there?”

A muffled voice which sounded to have seen many decades called out in response; “Yes, I am! What is it, Nikita?”

“We’ve got an apparent visitor here, says she wants to see Mister Steele. Are you almost done there?”

“In good time, dear Nikita! In good time!” The elderly voice called out in earnest, his voice charismatic yet stern in the words he spoke. It sounded clear to everyone present that “Father” wouldn’t be swayed from his “session”, whatever that may entail.

Treating the elderly man’s word as gospel, the bearded bodyguard nodded obediently and turned back to Loona, stating; “He says to wait.”

Loona let out a gruff sigh and reluctantly complied, pressing her back up against the opposite wall and folded her arms. Who knew how long this weird “session” would last, and because of this unknown, the hellhound figured that she would be waiting for the foreseeable near future. A calm stillness broke out between the two bodyguards and Loona as they stood and waited patiently, and before too long their patience was paid off. The handle on the door to “room 315” was pulled downwards from the other side, allowing the door to creep open, revealing a sight to behold emerging from the hospital room. Hobbling out through the door and into the hallway was an elderly man with a great white beard which stretched all the way down to his chest, a pair of

remarkably bushy eyebrows complimenting the stereotypical ‘wise, old man’ appearance. He was shorter than both Loona and the two men who flanked him on either side, perhaps no taller than the high five-foot mark, but stood upright and prominent in his surroundings despite his visible age. Most striking of all about this elderly gentleman was the clothes he wore; a black buttonless cassock with a white robe decorated with gold borders and symbols draped over his shoulders, and atop his head was a maroon ‘skufia’ marked with a jeweled cross. Loona didn’t know what to expect for the old man to look like, but it certainly wasn’t this. She flinched a little as he stepped out, faintly shocked by the sudden big reveal.

At first the elderly man dressed in priestly robes nodded with a smile to his two bodyguards, announcing to them in a quiet voice; “There we are, gentlemen. It is done.” Then his attention is pulled towards the odd one out in the hallway, his smile slightly fading as he analyzes the strange woman. He inquires kindly; “Ah. Is this the ‘visitor’ you speak of, Nikita?”

“That’s right,” Nikita confirmed, his hands still clasped together in a reserved stance; “Shall we depart yet, father?”

The question was met only with silence, the elderly bearded priest giving Loona an analytical and acknowledging stare which, although not rude in its nature, made her growingly uncomfortable. Though Loona chalked it up to his advancing age, there was something about his stare which told her that he was deep in thought about her presence and outward appearance — as if he was thinking deeply on how to react.

Quickly the stare became too overbearing not to react, prompting Loona to ask cautiously; “Hello? You… You good there?”

Once more the priest’s soft smile brightened behind his long white beard, turning to his two bodyguards and asking kindly; “Nikita, Joachim. Would you two wait by the elevators for me? I shall join you two before too long. I must converse in private.”

‘Nikita’ blinked before glancing at his balding counterpart who locked eyes with him, the pair of them nodding silently with obedience to the priest’s word, then with a sure-footed walk made their way down towards the elevators and out of sight. Loona was now alone — alone with the company of the quaint elderly man standing before her, a wave of uneasiness filling her mind.

Before too long, the elderly man spoke up; “I apologize for setting you aside with me so suddenly. I felt compelled to speak to you.”

Loona furrowed her brow, rubbing her forearm nervously as a bead of sweat trickled down her brow; “About what?”

The old priest smiled again, his eyes shifting around Loona’s face then said with a vague shrug; “Is there anything you wish to speak to me about?”

“What? Pfft, no?? Besides, who even are you??” Loona shunned the question, perhaps with a little hint of her trademark abrupt attitude towards most things. Her reaction to the well meaning question was a force of habit, to be sure, as Loona was fully aware of how that kind of attitude was a double-edged sword. Whilst it was her way of effectively fending off creeps and uninvited attention, it was also just as much a stumbling block — she had found that out the hard way throughout the past fortnight.

Luckily for Loona, however, it seemed as though the physically weary priest was willing to give her a second chance, seldom reacting to her abrupt first answer. He asks again; “Are you sure?”

“I-I mean…” Loona stammered before choking on her words, her mouth sitting agape awkwardly for a moment before she continued; “I guess? Maybe?? Okay, listen. Please don’t play games with me, I don’t even know who you are. I’m just here to see a friend, alright? I don’t want to think about anything else at the moment. I’m exhausted from it all.” In another slip of the tongue, Loona confessed her frame of mind in a brief state of subconsciousness, realizing what she had just said when it was too late. “Goddammit…” she thought to herself — the usually closed-off hellhound was never good at expressing her thoughts outwardly, and now because of a mere mistake, she was about to force herself to do exactly that.

Curiously, the look on the priest’s wrinkled face gave Loona the impression that she had somehow given the right answer. His rejuvenated look of attentiveness wasn’t a snarky one which bore resemblance to the downstairs receptionist’s feigned grin, either. Instead his outward expression veiled in thick white bristles appeared genuine and wholesome, like he was glad that the strange woman standing before him admitted the troubles weighing down on her weary conscience. In turn, Loona felt oddly comforted by the fact that someone who should be her utmost sworn enemy took pity on her, and possessed no ridicule or malice. Good thing he didn’t know what she was… right?

Sure enough, the inevitable question came, delivered by none other than this strange old priest; “What troubles you so?”

A voice from Loona's own conscience whispered; "Let him know, speak to him. Speak to him, let him know." It nagged her over and over, urging the reclusive hellhound to open up and speak her troubled mind. A spark of emotion flickered in Loona's heart like a minuscule but prominent flame, her eyes gleaming like the first rays of dawn sunlight on the brisk morning dew. It took a bit of internal strength, but eventually, before she even fully knew what she was doing, Loona opened up her heart; "…I think I feel lost. Not literally lost as in I don't know where I am. I mean, like… an "inside of myself" kind of lost. Does that make any sense, or am I speaking bullshit?"

The priest meekly shook his head, a faint understanding smile appearing underneath his thick and lengthy beard; "No, no. You make perfect sense. And why is it that you feel this way?"

"Heh. I ask myself the exact same thing," Loona admitted without hesitancy, letting out a sober laugh; "I don't know to be honest. I guess it's because I don't feel like I… "fit" anymore, you know? At least from where I come from."

"Disillusionment," the priest suggested respectfully, filling in the blank space which Loona had left wide open for interpretation.

"Y-Yeah, I guess so," Loona agreed, gesturing a passive hand at the word. She continued; "I've seen a lot these past two weeks. I've learnt a lot; who my friends are, who my enemies are as well. … Hmph... You know what sucks? Everything I grew up with knowing, it all now just feels like a lie. Just a big, stupid lie, and everyone I know is probably as blind to it like I was. It's not their fault though, I don't think. We're all in the same boat… but they haven't seen what I saw, what I've realized. And now I feel like I don't belong anymore because of that, because how would they understand? They wouldn't get it. They'd think I'm a liar, or I've gone insane, or some shit like that! … I'm a misfit, I always have been. Fuck, maybe I'm destined to forever be one."

The quiet which followed soon after Loona finished venting was oppressive and daunting to her, like a whole hour's silence tightly compressed into the claustrophobic space of mere seconds. None of what Loona had just said was from an arbitrary standpoint either; this in truth was what she really felt, and she saw that the time was right to confess her feelings to not only this complete stranger, but to herself as well. The ball had since left the troubled undercover hellhound's court, and now it was the old man's turn to respond as he saw fit, the anticipation of which was painful.

Eventually, however, the proverbial pain subsides when the 'Father' replies — a question; "Have you ever heard of a man by the name of Saint Gabriel?"

Loona, of course, had not, responding as such; "Say who now?"

“It’s a story somewhat similar to yours, to be sure,” the priest was quick to relate; “For much of his life starting from his childhood until the last of his years, he was a misfit. An outcast, even, in a time of great persecution for his homeland, and many people shunned him for being such an outlier like a sheep among goats. They called Saint Gabriel — then only “father” — a “fool”, a “crazy old man”, and many names like that. He willingly made a spectacle of himself when he saw fit, so much so that the authorities began persecuting and shunning him, too. Alas, he wore the name of “the fool” proudly for two reasons; The first being that he knew playing as “the fool” would be for the betterment and good of those around him, and the other reason was that he knew it was right. It was the truth. Perhaps, then, the reason why you feel like a misfit is because you understand an uncomfortable truth, whatever that may be in your case. Certain truths can be uncomfortable for all of us, but you mustn't despair because of it. Do not despair with this information you withhold, but instead utilize it to act for the good of those around you and yourself — Perhaps then will you find your newfound place. Rebel, be a punk, and be internally proud of it.”

By the time the elder standing before her had finished, Loona felt a blip of clarity appear somewhere within her mind — a light when everything else seemed so catastrophically dark. She stared attentively at the so-dubbed “father” in a taken aback state, unsure of what to make of his retelling of what sounded like a very interesting life story. What particularly resonated with Loona however was his advice. Much obliged was the advice to which the priest had just given her, now all that was left to do was for the recipient to figure out how to implement it; something which she wasn’t yet sure of. Hopefully in due time she would know.

“Anyhow,” the priest said as he cleared his throat; “I must leave. And by the way, it’s wonderful to meet you. Father Aleksander.”

“Uh.. L-Loona,” the disguised hellhound introduced herself in return, forcing it out through her lips.

There was a nod of acknowledgment from the priest as he smiled once more, saying one last brief farewell before turning around and departed down the hall towards the elevators. Loona watched the old man shuffle further and further away, watching him get ever closer to the slight left bend in the hallway which once passed would render him out of sight. Just before he could clear it, Loona suddenly found herself blurting out; “Hey, wait a minute!”

At once the priest stopped, turning himself momentarily back around to face the women he had just finished conversing with. He remained respectfully silent, awaiting for what she had to say.

Indecision fogged Loona's brain for a split second, before she broke the stagnation threatening to settle in. "Th…Thank you," Loona finally said with sincere gratitude — a rare expression from her, to be sure, and especially to the likes of a complete stranger. Shortly after she asked one last question; "How did you know I needed to talk?"

"Oh no, it wasn't me who decided to converse. It was you," Father Aleksander simply replied, a tone of light assurance carried prominently in his voice stained by time. And with that, the elderly priest turns back around on his feet and shuffles his way to the elevators, then at last, like a graceful specter in a cloak, disappears out of sight.

Out of all the encounters Loona was half expecting to have that day, that certainly wasn't one of them. But that was now done and dusted; now she could focus on the real reason why she came here. Loona stared at the plain beige door before her, grabbing hold of the handle which was cold to the touch and pulled down, allowing her to open it freely inwards. All at once the hospital room's simple interior was revealed to the visitor as she stepped quietly inside, the dull and obnoxious white walls welcoming her with open arms. Other than the white-sheeted hospital bed and the retracted privacy curtain suspended around it, the side table, a cupboard, the bathroom to Loona's immediate left, and a singular chair, the room for all intents and purposes was empty. … Except of course for the tall figure with his back facing towards the latest arrival, his dark blue buttoned shirt and the beige trousers dressed in the sunlight. He stood there silently as he gazed quietly through the large window, his hands resting palm-down on the sill and one leg crossed comfortably over the other, resting his boot-clad foot on the article of footwear's nose.

There was an awkward silence as Loona just stood there, hoping that the occupant would notice her presence on his own to no avail. Now Loona detested having to start conversation, and on any other given day she would've left the figure in the dark and declare it "their loss". Today though was starkly different, an "outlier" just like her. With that in mind, Loona politely clears her throat with a balled fist against her mouth, watching as the man flinches to the sudden noise and spun around to greet whoever had joined him. Needless to say, it was obvious who he was from his distinct looks, his eyes widening as he met with his old "partner in crime"; that same-old fair-skinned woman with two forms.

"Aw, you're kidding me… Hahah— Oh God almighty, no way!! Hah—HaHAHAHAHAAA!!!" A massive surprised smile spread liberally across Jim's face as he met Loona for the thrice time. He broke into a fit of disbelieving wheezing laughter which rendered him weak, propping both hands onto his knees as he processed who had just arrived!

Loona returned with a side smile of her own, though she was comparatively more collected. She shyly waves her right hand at him as she threatened to break out into a chuckle of her own; "Heyy! Heh— Yeeeeah, it's me again!"

Jim weakly shook his head as his laughter died down but his smile didn't, allowing him to stand himself back upright to greet an old friend. He looked as though he wanted to say a million words all at once, none of which came out, as he resorted to opening his arms as an invitation to embrace. This made Loona chuckle and shake her head, but instead of shunning the invitation she 'embraced it', opening her own arms as she strides towards her old associate. Before they both knew it, they were both interlocked into a mutual and incredibly tight, heartfelt hug, perhaps far stronger than any other they had done before as they wrapped their arms around each other. The hug lasted a little longer than expected, before at last they both let go of one another in tandem now that they knew for certain the other wouldn't run away.

With a wide smile on her face, Loona asked with a light fidget; "So how you doing??"

"I'm good!" Jim stammered back, adrenaline and dopamine coursing through his veins; "And-And you?"

"I'm good! Uh— Peachy!" Loona grinned as she swayed lightly on her feet in a fidget, the energy to move nearly overwhelming; "I've.. I've come to pick you up, hahah, get you outta here!"

"Oh, have ya??" Jim cocked his head, then wittily remarking; "Not dragging me back to Hell, are ya?"

"Oh piss off, absolutely not! As if!" Loona cackled, taking the remark surprisingly well. In turn, she made one of her own; "Besides, I can already make your life a living hell here if I wanted to!"

Jim cackled at this returned "threat", making his way to seat himself on the side of the bed as he reacted so; "HAH, right! Nahhh, ya wouldn't do that, I know ya."

"Oh do you now?" Loona smirked with cheek about it, raising one eyebrow as she followed her friend, taking a seat aboard the sheet-covered mattress to Jim's left flank.

"Yeahhh, maybe not," Jim shook his head jokingly as his own grin faded into a straight line as he looked to ponder how to continue their first conversation in a while; "Errr… But seriously, Loona, how've you been?"

This provoked a short and sweet laugh to herself as Loona shook her head; “Heheh. I mean, other than the whole thing about me questioning my own existence and where I fit, I’m doing okay!”

“So what about everyone at home, is everyone good?”

“Yeah, everyone’s fine. Well, you know, apart from one…” Loona said as her voice trailed off towards the end, her thus far extroverted demeanor closing off in that moment of reflection. Her memory conjured that very Intensive Care Unit bed with the Doberman-esque Hellhound lying dormant within it, all sorts of casts and tubes jutting out of him, almost like he was a computer router or a power outlet rather than a living, breathing being. Death was merciful for Morger, passing on his own body’s accord late in the night.

Jim bowed his head towards the ground, understanding the implications of Loona’s meaning; “Shit, I’m sorry. Bad business.”

“It was,” Loona wholeheartedly agreed with a somber nod of her head; “But it’s all over now, thank fuck. … But yeah, anyway. How about I get you outta here? I’m getting sick of this place already.”

“Christ, you’re telling me?” Jim grinned feignedly as he heaved himself back up on his feet, Loona following suit; “I’ve been having to stay here near up to a week! If you could, that’d be great!”

A grin formed on Loona’s face; “Why do you think I’m here?” She asked rhetorically as she led him towards the door, his complaint acting as a catalyst for them to leave. With the party of two now reunited, Loona said with relief in her voice as they stepped out into the hallway and towards the elevators; “Come on, big guy, let’s get you home.”

“Was that you talking to the priest out there, was it?” Jim passively asked, tidying up his fringe of dark brown hair by running his fingers across.

Loona nods admittedly as she made steady headway towards the elevators, maneuvering around a lone nurse who passed by; “Yep, that was me. I almost can’t believe I did.”

“Whatcha say to him?”

The disguised hellhound's answer started off with a light, almost nonchalant shrug of her shoulders; "Pffft! I don't know, just.. words. Things on my mind, which is a damn well lot. He felt compelling to speak to for some reason. Why, what did you say to him?"

"Argh, probably the same sorta thing you might've said, I dunno," Jim casually admitted as they both found the elevators, taking it upon himself to press the call button to descend. The pair of them watched on like a pair of cats as the number on the floor indicator began ascending sluggishly, ascending from "G" and shortly after up to "1". As they watched, Jim turned to Loona and offered; "Do you want me to drive?"

"If you can," Loona was kind enough to acknowledge the young man's health, fishing the keys out of the pocket of her pants and handing it to their rightful owner. Just as she did so, the intercom above the elevator entrance chimed as the doors rolled open, revealing the pristinely kept interior which both human and hellhound stepped forth into. Then like a pair of guardsmen at a gate, the metallic silver doors clattered back shut, sealing them inside for the descent.

"Hey, Loona. … Loona. … Earth to Loona."

The hellhound woke up with a slobbish snort of her nose, her eyelids peeling back from her red-iris eyes to familiarize herself with her surroundings. She lazily cocked her head to the right, finding Jim still behind the wheel. Loona croaked out with a slurred groan; "Mmmgh.. what..?"

Jim winced as he cracked his fingers, then flexing them after the long non-stop drive. He announces with a slight hush; "We're home now."

"…Are we..?" Loona asked in a daze, her voice regaining its proper tone though it was still raspy and mumbled. She licks and smacks her lips away from the cotton mouth she felt, the dryness brought about from breathing through her slack mouth during what was otherwise a great nap.

Sitting herself back upright in the passenger's seat after having slid down it in her sleep, Loona rubbed the sleep from her eyes and blinked before looking outside through narrowed eyelids. Sure enough, just as Jim had said, they were definitely 'home' — or at least, his home. She could tell it was his home by the veranda and the faded green front door, as well as the two chairs off to the left of the doorway. At least for the time being, the driver had parked his car nose-first against the porch, leaving them with only a few short feet to enter into the old wooden house. Loona let out a

silent yawn and stretched her limbs as Jim stepped out of the car, taking his keys along with him before shutting the driver's side door with a sudden dull "bang". The remaining passenger took a second to gather her bearings as she returned to consciousness, and once done so opened her door and listlessly swung her legs out, acquiring her backpack along with her then slamming the door back shut.

Another exhausted yawn escaped Loona's mouth which drowned out Jim's question to her, prompting her to ask tiredly; "Mh? Come again..?"

"I said do you wanna sit inside or stay out on the veranda?" Jim repeated himself with one foot on the short flight of stairs up to the covered porch, having twisted himself around awkwardly to look at his companion.

"Mmm… Sitting inside sounds good…" Loona groaned in response, having not fully awoken just yet; "I-In the living room, or…?"

"Yeah, in the living room," Jim huffed as he set foot on the veranda, shuffling up to the front door with house keys in hand, flawlessly sliding the key into the lock and turning clockwise which pulled back the internal mechanism. At once Jim swung the front door open and stepped foot inside, at long last back in the midst of the place he felt most comfortable.

This was true to a lesser extent for Loona who followed Jim inside, taking the time to transform out of her disguise and back into her true form, her fair skin once more being replaced with white and dark gray fur which coated her entire body. For the first time in what felt like ages, Loona paced quietly through this old home which she sought desperate refuge in those few months ago, re-familiarizing herself with the quaint and pleasant scene she ambled in the midst of. The hellhound sauntered through the open entranceway into the comfort of the spacious living room, finding Jim examining the empty space where his flat-screen television once stood with both hands on his hips.

He shook his head and turned to Loona, pointing at the empty space with a grin; "Gonna have to fork out some cash to get a bloody new one, ay?"

"Yeah, well, that sucks. Sounds like a 'you' problem," Loona remarked lightheartedly as she dawdled towards what was once her designated armchair, all the more ready to embrace its felt-covered padding. Soon as she reached it, she plonked her rear-end right down into the gracefully soft cushioning, letting out an exhausted exhale as she lazily stretched herself out, stiffening her arms and legs before finally devolving into a lazy, relaxed lump of fur.

Jim snickered as he watched Loona relax, seating his own behind in his own chair as he asked with a raised brow; “Comfy enough for you?”

“Heheh, ohh yeah~” Loona said as she stared lazily up at the ceiling, a big calm smile spread across her white-furred muzzle. As a passing comment, she remarked with another light stretch; “Mmh! It’s great to be back in my penthouse which I pay jack-shit for.”

“Yeah, yeah…” Jim nodded lazily along to Loona’s brief gloating, slurring his words to a certain minuscule extent; “You get free drinks, free food, free bloody everything. Argh nah, I don’t give a shit. What’s mine is yours, nothing’s changed in that case.”

Loona smirked louder as she pivoted her head lazily towards Jim, her head still nestled in the unbelievably soft backrest; “You good there? You sound kinda delirious.”

“...I’m tired…” the young bushman admitted without guilt, a weak half-grin plastered across his lips; “But I’m finally home, that’s all that matters.”

“Pffft! Damn straight, dude,” the equally as exhausted hellhound agreed in full, understanding the sentiment with utmost sympathy. Just as she was about to settle down, a thought graced Loona’s mind, reigniting after being extinguished so she could get some shuteye on the way ‘home’. It had been stirring since her visit to the police station, and even before when she was laying in her own bed pondering deeply, and now it had come back stronger and more tempting to be entertained than ever. And so, with nothing much else to talk about, Loona gave it her all and pushed herself to utter; “Hey Jim?”

This caught Jim’s attention on the first try; “Yeah?” Now there was no turning back.

Now that her cue to ask away had arrived, Loona lifted her head upright and looked towards the human sitting beside her, then asking with mild timidness; “I-If I decided to stay here a while, would you allow me to?”

Jim’s eyes narrowed slightly with curiosity as he heard Loona’s inquiry, turning his head to look at her. His mouth sat agape a second before inquiring for himself; “What? Why do you ask, what’s going on?”

Loona sighed faintly; “Can you answer the question first? Please?” She pleaded, almost sounding vulnerable in the way she conveyed her words.

“Uh.. Well shoot, yeah of course,” Jim affirmed without much hesitancy; “But yeah, why do you ask?”

“Well…” the hellhound began as her eyes shifted with thought; “I’ve been thinking. Maybe hell’s not all that cut for me anymore. Nothing’s concrete yet, but… I’m thinking of leaving, for good. Like sure, it’s my home, but I don’t feel at home there. I don’t feel safe, especially after what I’ve found out.”

“What have you found out?” Jim asked gently, his attention fully captured with Loona’s explanation.

In response, Loona shook her head; “I don’t wanna talk about it right now. But yeah, I’ve been thinking about a whole goddamn lot recently. Might tell you later, who knows right now.”

“Yeah, I getcha,” Jim sympathized; “I’ve been doing the same. Hey, if you want my advice, it’s best that you go with the flow and take it day-by-day. Don't run head-first into it, because then you’ll start making mistakes. But look, just remember I’m here for you, yeah? If you want to stay here, in my house for a while, you’re always welcome to if it makes you feel better.”

“You’d do that? Allow me to stay up here?” Loona asked quietly, perhaps not wanting to be heard acting too reliant to others despite nobody else being around.

Jim smiled and nodded affirmatively, leaving no doubt in his judgment; “A hundred percent. I need the company myself sometimes.”

Such a level of kindness was something which Loona hadn’t expected deep down, having anticipated some blunt and reasoned refusal one way or another. Or perhaps that was just her deep-rooted pessimism trying to take over her mind once again; she needed to learn how to control that, admittedly. A soft, appreciative smile appeared on Loona’s face as she quietly said; “Thank you. Really, like, thank you so much. For everything.”

“Nahh, it’s my pleasure,” the human replied earnestly as he began to heave himself off his chair once more; “Anyhow! I’m heading into the kitchen, ya want anything or nah?”

“Uh, hm… Oh shit, you got any booze??”

“Fucken oath I do! What brand, huh? What’s ya poison?”

“Got any of that Daniel’s or whatever-the-fuck that stuff it’s called?”

“Jack Daniel’s? Err… Pretty sure I do, yeah.”

-= <u>End…?</u> =-

Epilogue - Correspondence

The following is a back-and-forth email correspondence sent between Vasily Georgyvich Antonov and Father Aleksander Chatkin in the first week of September, 2023. The redacted parts in the following documents are sensitive personal information, which includes addresses — email or otherwise, phone numbers, and links to private intelligence which assisted in the finding of Mr. James Henry Steele, as well as other miscellaneous records:

“Sent: September 4th, 2023 @ 11:05 (24 hr time)

Sent by: Vasily Georgyvich Antonov ([REDACTED])

Sent to: Fr. Aleksander Chatkin ([REDACTED])

Topic: An Inquiry

_____

To Fr. Aleksander Chatkin;

Good Morning, father,

I hope this message finds you well enough. I write forth to you with an inquiry which has been bothering me for the betterment of two weeks now. As you may recall, last Sunday I made a passing comment as we conversed after the Divine Liturgy, where I asked for your opinion on a matter — that being whether or not truly everyone, not necessarily on an Earthly level, can have that of a ‘Burning Heart’ and have a sense of what’s right. You might recall what you replied with as well, that you would get back to me on the matter once you had made a thorough judgment on it.

Although it has only been twenty-four hours since that passing conversation took place, I feel the need to ask if you have since come to a conclusion yet. For my eagerness, I do apologize, for I do not mean to hurry you. Since the conclusion of my assignment, the question has certainly been eating away at me.

Kindest regards,

— Vasily Georgyvich Antonov”

“Sent: September 4th, 2023 @ 13:29 (24 hr time)

Sent by: Fr. Aleksander Chatkin ([REDACTED])

Sent to: Vasily Georgyvich Antonov ([REDACTED])

Re: An Inquiry

_____

Good afternoon, Vasily. Thank you for writing to me.

I regret to inform you that I have still yet to come to a full conclusion regarding your question, as coming to one would require for me to have more context as to what, or perhaps who, you’re referring to. Understand that there are two possible interpretations as to what a “Burning Heart” might be.

First of all, if by a “Burning Heart” you mean that of having a deep personal correspondence with God with that on par with the saints, then the answer to your question is perhaps not, though I will not feign acting as a ‘know-it-all’ in that regard. However, if by a “Burning Heart”, you mean someone acquiring a deeply internal sense as to what is ‘right’ and ‘just’ through any form of intervention and or circumstance, I am more able to say for certain that yes; if anyone opens their “loving heart” enough, they are able to acquire such a sense of righteousness and a hunger for justice.

To obtain just a taste of these qualities, however, the person has to go through a radical change to reform themselves. Though it is grim to say, it is often said that suffering builds character, and assists people in discovering their true selves. In this regard, such a radical transformation can happen to just about anyone, but this requires said person to be genuine in their search for truth and justice. They must not feign their interest with what is good in the world.

I hope that what I have told you will help you in the answer that you seek.

God Bless You,

— Fr. Aleksander Chatkin of the Russian Orthodox Church in [REDACTED]"

"Sent: September 5th, 2023 @ 07:02 (24 hr time)

Sent by: Vasily Georgyvich Antonov ([REDACTED])

Sent to: Fr. Aleksander Chatkin ([REDACTED])

Re: An Inquiry

_____

Good morning once again, Father,

Thank you for your reply. While you have given me helpful insight as per your last email, unfortunately it isn't necessarily the answer which I'm looking for. The answer to which I seek is perhaps far more complex than what I initially anticipated. As you mentioned in your last

correspondence, father, such a momentous change can truly occur to anyone who wilfully opens their ‘loving heart’ and becomes accepting of the truths of what is right and just, even if their life was influenced most likely by primitive urges of wrath and rancor, and acts of harm onto others. Truly, nobody is without a chance for momentous change, I realize that now — perhaps to an extent which I never anticipated. I still don’t, even after much thought.

As for your request to understand the context to my inquiry, I am able to provide to you some limited yet sufficient information. I’m sure you recall when I requested for a blessing of a house in the township of Morrisvale, a request which you fulfilled with the kindness of your heart. The house was connected to the disappearance of a local man who owns the aforementioned property, and the case continued for another week after your blessings upon the house when it ended with the man in question being found. While you were in the process of blessing the interior, I received a message from the state police across the border in New South Wales. Long story short, they informed me that a second party, a young woman appearing to be in her twenties, was apparently seen with the missing man a few short days prior.

Provided here is the security camera still of the second party: [REDACTED]

The woman in the photograph provided above is the reason why I felt the need to speak to you. While she might seem normal at first, I am of the view that she is far from it. I conversed with her, too. There’s something about her which boggles my mind. Within her are two ravenous wolves; one which tries to return to its most primitive instincts of rancor and harshness, and the other which is novel and recognizes justness and what is right. I do not mean to say this in a derogatory manner, but she is a walking contradiction and a misfit who now seems to have been exposed to a truth she was far from ready for.

I do ponder about her. I try to find out what her ulterior motives might be, that is if she has any. Something in the way she acts, however, tells me that she doesn’t — in other words, she might be genuine. Once more, father, I would like to hear your verdict.

Kindest Regards,

— Vasily Georgyvich Antonov”

“Sent: September 5th, 2023 @ 17:45 (24 hr time)

Sent by: Fr. Aleksander Chatkin ([REDACTED])
Sent to: Vasily Georgyvich Antonov ([REDACTED])

Re: An Inquiry

_____

Good Evening, Vasily. Thank you for your reply once again.

It might come as a surprise to you, Vasily, but I believe that I, too, conversed with this very same woman not too long ago. She came to me with a confession of her feelings, revealing to me that she felt like a ‘misfit’ of sorts. As you have suggested, I too believe that there is something much about her which she might be coming to terms with; thus is the journey of life. Perhaps in her case, she is going down a path which millions have gone before her.

If by chance you do manage to come across her once more, do let me know how she is coming along with her search. Here is my Phone Number if you wish to contact me after finding her: [REDACTED]

And perhaps even if you see fit, urge her to come forth to me and I will converse further with her. Maybe with further talks will things fall into place in her mind.

God Bless you,

— Fr. Aleksander Chatkin of the Russian Orthodox Church in [REDACTED]”

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